

THE BINDINGS OF LOVE  
Explorations of Pathological Mourning, The Problem of Guilt,  
And the Tasks of Poetry

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## Declaration

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In Loving Memory

Valerie Ann Cullen Reece  
*Aeternum vale, hinc illae lacrimae*

&

Barbara Lee Pugh  
*I will always be your Aussey, you will always be my Mimi*

MENELAOS           What's wrong with you? What sickness wastes you away?

ORESTES           Conscience. I know what I've done.

MENELAOS       How do you mean?

ORESTES           Grief is killing me.

MENELAOS       She is a dread goddess. But curable.

—Euripides, *Orestes* (trans. Anne Carson)

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## List of Abbreviations

### Levinas

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BPW ..... *Basic Philosophical Writings*

OTB ..... *Otherwise Than Being*

RTB ..... *Is It Righteous to Be?*

### Freud

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MM ..... *Mourning and Melancholia*

ON ..... *On Narcissism*

### Kierkegaard

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FT ..... *Fear and Trembling*

### Baggesen

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AH ..... *Agnete from Holmegaard*

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## Abstract

### The Bindings of Love: Explorations of Pathological Mourning, The Problem of Guilt, And the Tasks of Poetry

Austin M. Reece

This dissertation examines significant interpretations of the biblical Akedah in the larger context of a literary and philosophical exploration of pathological mourning, the trauma and guilt that trigger it, and the ways in which literary art—various conceptions and practices of poetry—might provide amelioration for the sufferer. The work of mourning is a complex phenomenon that involves processing profound loss, which in turn enables the bereaved to live with who or what is lost. *Pathological* mourning, in the forms of mania and melancholia, occurs when healthy mourning is interrupted by guilt, which can lead to self-destruction. As a devastating scene of love, loss, and betrayal, the Akedah is illustrative of the power of guilt and how it drives pathological mourning, making it an ideal text for the purposes of this study that offers a new reading and application of the Akedah in relation to the study of pathological mourning.

Further, this dissertation engages with Kierkegaardian and Levinasian motifs to clarify the contours of pathological mourning. Kierkegaard and Levinas, both important interpreters of the Akedah, are read against the grain in novel ways to demonstrate how their ideas illuminate aspects of mania and melancholia, two concepts central to Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Through this critical and creative rapprochement with psychoanalysis, a space is opened to rethink the promise of mourning in the face of overwhelming guilt. This promise of mourning—of healing, of loving again—is approached through an analysis of the tasks of poetry to examine in what ways this literary art form might aid in the restoration of the movement of time to the pathological mourner and staunch their spiraling melancholia. Theoretical, practical, and performative aspects of poetry are investigated, and an original manuscript of poems follows the critical portion of the dissertation.



## CHAPTER ONE | INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Overview of the Problem

The Akedah is an important text for the study of pathological mourning since it contains within it suggestive analogies and implicit interpretative models of both melancholia and mania missed by philosophers in the past despite their ongoing engagement with it. Akedah (עקידה) is the Hebrew word for “binding.”<sup>1</sup> It is used in Jewish and Christian theology to refer to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. In Genesis 22:1-19, Abraham is commanded by God, referred to here as *’ēlōhîm* (אֱלֹהִים), to offer his son Isaac as an *’ōlāh* (עֹלָה) or *holocaust*, that is, a whole burnt sacrifice where flames and ash ascend to heaven for the purpose of seeking expiation and paying homage to God.<sup>2</sup> The textual details of the holocaust in Genesis 22:9 are brief and there is no outward sign of emotion from Abraham, but if we take Leviticus Chapter 1 as a possible clue to what this traumatic ritual killing requires, then we can imagine the following: Isaac must be tied up (*akedat yitzhak*), Abraham must place his hand on Isaac’s head, Isaac must be placed on a woodpile and slaughtered, his blood must be splashed upon the altar, his body must be cut into pieces, the woodpile must be lit, and the pieces of Isaac’s corpse must be consumed by flames and reduced to cinders.<sup>3</sup> This sense of binding denotes the act of making captive and holding hostage. It is a means to the facilitation of total destruction. Ultimately, on at least one

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Eisenberg and Ellen Scolnic, *Dictionary of Jewish Words* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society: 2006), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, [www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3847](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3847).

See also, “holocaust.” OED online. [www.oed.com.libus.csd.mu.edu/view/Entry/87793](http://www.oed.com.libus.csd.mu.edu/view/Entry/87793).

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 1:1-9, *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), pp. 152-153. Genesis 22:9 states, “They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.” Ibid. p. 31.

interpretation of the text, the Akedah of Isaac achieves God's satiation by testing and confirming Abraham's faith, thereby ratifying the *berith* (ברית) or covenant between them.<sup>4</sup>

It is instructive to think of a modern convicted criminal strapped into an electric chair so as not to disturb the execution process itself. This comparison is not perfect. Contemporary executions provide prisoners with anesthetic before facing their demise;<sup>5</sup> Isaac is to be stabbed and burnt without sedatives of any kind. God is commanding a violent end for Isaac. Abraham, however pained, is willing to obey. Violence, like other key concepts taken up and analyzed in this dissertation, exhibits an extraordinary polysemy, which is to say it is a single word that has more than one meaning. The adumbration being sketched here is the movement of an overwhelming power that damages or destroys the person it touches.<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, this is not the only thing the Akedah has in common with pathological mourning. Abraham both wields and suffers this power in all its apparent cruelty and desolation.

Of the many great masterpieces in the history of Western art devoted to the Akedah—Ghiberti, Brunelleschi, Donatello, del Sarto, Caravaggio, Rubens, Blake, Chagall—only Rembrandt's 1635 painting titled "Sacrifice of Isaac" depicts Abraham's hand covering the *entire* face of Isaac at the moment just before the death blow (see Artwork 1).<sup>7</sup>

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Artwork 1

Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1635

Oil on canvas, height: 75.9 in, width: 51.9 in; Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia  
Public Domain

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Hahn, "Covenant, Oath, and the Aqedah: Diatheke in Galations 3:15-18," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 67, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> For example, "Bid to Use Common Anesthetic for Executions Threatens Patients," in *Scientific American*, October 2013, [www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=bid-to-use-common-anesthetic-for-executions-threatens-us-patients](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=bid-to-use-common-anesthetic-for-executions-threatens-us-patients).

<sup>6</sup> "violence, n." OED online. [www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/223638](http://www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/223638).

<sup>7</sup> Jo Milgrom's monograph about the Akedah and art is fascinating and thorough, though she does not comment on this difference between Rembrandt and the other masters. *Jo Milgrom, The Binding of Isaac: the Akedah, a Primary Symbol in Jewish Thought and Art* (Berkeley: Bibal Press, 1988).



This visual choice by Rembrandt captures the proximity and intimacy of the touch, Father and son, skin to skin, as well as the terror involved in eradicating the face of the other person who looks at you in all their vulnerability and pain. At its core, vulnerability denotes the ever-present possibility of being wounded.<sup>8</sup> If an important aspect of love is entering into a cycle of wounding and repairing, hurting and forgiving, then this cycle is raised to an unbearable intensity in the Akedah as Abraham covers Isaac's face and raises his knife. An analogous cycle can be found at the center of the experience of pathological mourning. I will return to these motifs in Chapters 3 and 4 in my discussions of melancholia and mania as well as in Chapter 5 where I explore the Levinasian theme of the face of the other as it relates to one of the tasks of poetry, namely, reassembling and repairing the traumatized self that seemingly mourns forever.

The most horrific act of violent-inflicted loss is genocide, which as the etymology of the word suggests, is acting with the intent to destroy (*cidere*), in whole or in part, an entire group of people (*genos*).<sup>9</sup> It is a double murder: one kills the individual in order to destroy the group to which the individual belongs. Raphael Lemkin, who first coined the term, hoped his neologism would "chill listeners and invite immediate condemnation."<sup>10</sup> Despite acknowledging the limits of language to fully describe the Ottoman and Nazi atrocities enacted during the cover of war, Lemkin believed the word genocide to be the rare term that poignantly and decidedly gets to the heart of the matter.<sup>11</sup>

In most interpretations, Abraham is ready and willing to kill Isaac but is stopped by an angel at the very last moment from completing God's command (Genesis 22:12); in other interpretations, Abraham kills his son without interference. Either way, Abraham's ritual killing

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<sup>8</sup> "vulnerable, adj." OED online. [www-oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/224872](http://www-oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/224872).

<sup>9</sup> "Genocide," *Online Etymological Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com/genocide>.

<sup>10</sup> Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Perennial Publishers, 2003), p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

of Isaac, whether only attempted or fully realized, can be interpreted as an *embryonic* form of genocide. By killing Isaac, Abraham is simultaneously destroying the future generations of Hebrews that have been promised by God to flourish *through* Isaac's progeny.<sup>12</sup> Without Isaac the Jewish race ceases to exist and the covenant-promise initiated in Genesis 15 is thereby canceled. Furthermore, since Abraham "effects blessing" and through his "seed [Isaac] shall all the nations of the earth be blessed,"<sup>13</sup> to destroy Isaac is to simultaneously deny the rest of humanity the opportunity to experience the life-sustaining benefits of the revealed will of God. Of all the maledictions enacted in the Pentateuch, this would surely be the curse of all curses.<sup>14</sup>

To interpret the Akedah as curse and the binding and killing of Isaac as potentially genocidal has the advantage of making the violent trauma intertwined with guilt in this ancient tale concrete and contemporary in its impact on people in extraordinary crisis.<sup>15</sup> As it is also with the traumatic origins of pathological mourning, one death, when it is the death of someone you love, has the potential to irreparably break the heart and wound the mind. Genocide, despite resulting in the mass extermination of human life, is ultimately one death, plus one, plus one, plus one, plus one, plus one, again and again, each singular and irreplaceable.<sup>16</sup>

When Abraham raises his knife, he comes to the threshold of the perfection of guilt and death, a truly vertiginous point of no return. The vertigo and acrophobia reach their zenith when

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Genesis 22:17 states: "I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants [through Isaac] as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes." *Tanakh*, op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. See Hans Walter Wolff, "The Kerygma of the Yahwist," in *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions*, co-authored by Wolff and Walter Brueggemann (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 41-66. In interpreting Genesis 12:1-4a, Wolff states, "Consequently, if verse 2 sets the goal of the Abrahamic blessing in that he himself will become a blessing, and if verse 3a adds that in this blessing the destiny of his contemporaries is decided by Yahweh, then the conclusion of verse 3b can do nothing less than make this magnificent offer: by acknowledging Abraham, all the families of the earth can gain blessing." p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> See Genesis 3, *Tanakh*, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Chris Danta, "Derrida and the Test of Secrecy," *Interpreting Abraham: Journeys to Moriah*, ed. Bradley Beach and Matthew Powell (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 207.

<sup>16</sup> See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

the tantalizing possibility of universal eternal blessing and peace are within reach. This fits perfectly with the documentary hypothesis that argues Genesis and the other four books of the Pentateuch are the result of four distinct literary efforts, each with its own style, voice, and message.<sup>17</sup> The Akedah in particular appears to be the interlacing of the earlier Yawhist literary effort, which emphasizes the *blessings* in store for Abraham and his descendants, with the later redaction of the Elohist writer, whose primary theme is the *fear* of God. In the Akedah, blessings may ultimately prevail (though this remains ambiguous), but the fear of violent destruction and its lasting aftermath cannot be denied or downplayed. As I will explore further below, the same can be said of pathological mourning.

If God is bracketed out of the Akedah, then Abraham is a murderer of the worst sort by the standards of law and morality; if God is indeed commanding a holocaust of Isaac and a proto-genocide of the Jewish people, then Abraham is being asked to do something *unthinkable* that only God could redeem.<sup>18</sup> What is deemed good on the universal level, enforced by laws and values that unite society together to enhance the welfare of the whole human community, is inexplicably pushed aside by what is demanded of the solitary individual who stands alone before God, His command, and His judgment.<sup>19</sup> Yet when God is bracketed out of the Akedah for heuristic purposes, we can further explore the psychological and literary usefulness of this dark tale to illuminate something central about melancholia and mania, their causes, cartography, and potential curative practices, which is my aim in this thesis.

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<sup>17</sup> *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions*, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), hereafter abbreviated as FT.

<sup>19</sup> The paradox of suffering blameworthiness in faithful obedience is identified as a central conflict where guilt emerges with its own destructive movement. Donald Mosher offers a preliminary definition of guilt as “the feeling of remorse for violating a moral rule [...], guilt is the affect of shame when centrally assembled with a moral judgment that the self is blameworthy.” “Guilt,” *Encyclopedia of Mental Health*, volume 2 (New York: Academic Press, 1998), p. 301.

There is another sense of *binding* at work in the Akedah that helps to explain the continued fascination of philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and artists with the story. Abraham is placed in a *double bind* by God, which is to say he experiences an inescapable moral dilemma with no acceptable alternatives. He perceives two simultaneous but mutually contradictory cues, one from God and one from Isaac, so that whatever he chooses will be wrong. To obey God is to destroy his son and kill the thing he loves; to obey Isaac's silent, perhaps implicit, plea for mercy<sup>20</sup> is to violate a direct order from God and risk eternal damnation. It is a paradigmatic example of the *damned if you do, damned if you don't* scenario in which guilt and suffering appear unavoidable. Can a human being survive the trauma of this kind of double bind without experiencing irreparable harm to himself and others? And how can this ancient, poem-like story be useful in deepening our understanding of pathological mourning where trauma and guilt are its defining features? Furthermore, how can exploring the nature, purpose, and practice of poetry begin to loosen the knotty double bind of melancholia and mania? These difficult questions and subjects will be the guiding forces that ground, surround, and organize the material to come.

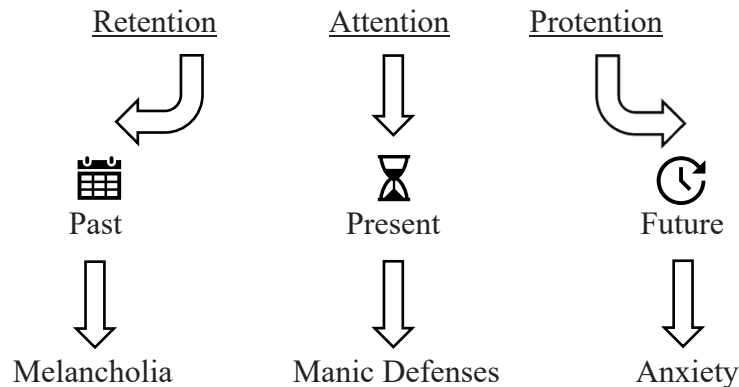
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<sup>20</sup> Admittedly Isaac does not speak or plead for mercy in Genesis 22:9-10 when he is bound and the knife is put to his throat by his father. According to Speiser, this is "the most poignant and eloquent silence in all literature." See *Genesis, Anchor Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), p. 165. Some Midrashic interpretations suggest Isaac is a grown man who happily accepts his fate and is proud to play his role. See Louis A. Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* (Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997), pp. 62-64. Of course, much depends on how old Isaac actually is in the story, which is a much-debated issue. If Isaac is a small child, then surely he would be afraid, confused, and unwilling to die whether he could articulate these things or not. Either way, a case could be made that Isaac's right to life is being violated regardless of his age as his silence does not equal to his consent.

## 1.12 Poetic Attention and Arrested Time

The concept of *attention* is often approached in isolation, but I think it is more useful for the purpose of this study to analyze it as one part of a triad or concept cluster along with *retention* and *protention*.<sup>21</sup> As I will show, a central component of pathological mourning is the lived disfigurement of time, which is a necessary condition of the suicidal ideation found in serious cases of melancholia. The following figure illustrates the connection between the three terms (retention, attention, and protention), ecstatic temporality (past, present, and future), and their correlating pathological states of mind (melancholia, mania, and anxiety).<sup>22</sup>

**Figure 1**  
Concept Cluster of Lived and Disfigured Time



<sup>21</sup> In an impressive recent monograph, Lucy Alford gestures towards the etymological dimension of attention, but never makes it explicit. She also does not consider attention in the broader context of the concept cluster I analyze here. *Forms of Poetic Attention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> In one sense of *ecstasy/ecstatic*, time itself is constantly stretching and driving forward (*existanai*) from out of (*ex*) one moment and into another. Also, as I will explain shortly, each human being stands out (*ex-tasis*) by possessing the ability to give and stretch their minds into the past, present, and future. See “Ecstasy,” *Online Etymological Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/ecstasy>. See also Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), sections 65–68. See also, David Farrell Krell, *Ecstasy, Catastrophe: Heidegger from Being and Time to the Black Notebooks* (New York: SUNY Press, 2015), pp. 11–36.

These three words—retention, attention, and protention—all share the same root, namely, ten(d), which means to *stretch*, *reach*, or *give*. The word *extend*, which also shares the same root, is a useful example of how the root informs everyday usage. If a person extends their hand in friendship to another, then they are *reaching* out and *giving* it, *stretching* their body forward for an embrace. And perhaps they do it *tenderly*, reaching out with a gentle affection.

Though the terms retention and protention are important to phenomenological research, for example, Husserl's *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*,<sup>23</sup> I want to examine their polysemous nature in the direction of the pathological experience of arrested time and the way poetry might be a form of attention that restores the movement of time to the suffering person.

Retention is a feature of the human mind whereby a person stretches or reaches their mind backwards in the direction of the past. It is associated with the functions of memory and the ability to retain information or recall records of things from the near and distant past. It is useful here to compare a related term of philosophical significance, namely, the ancient Greek word ἀνάμνησις (*anamnesis*). Anamnesis is a portmanteau word combining *mimneskesthai* (to cause to remember, to think), which is related to *mneme* (memory), and *ana* (back)—thus, to think back, to recall, to remember things from the past.<sup>24</sup> Amnesia, a closely related term to anamnesis, is the *loss* of memory, a pernicious forgetfulness.<sup>25</sup>

Protention, in contrast, is a feature of the human mind whereby a person stretches or reaches their mind forward in the direction of the future. It is associated with the functions of imagination and the ability to visualize future possibilities and to anticipate the consequences

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<sup>23</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).

<sup>24</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, Kindle (Omaha: Patristic Publishing, 2019), location 6544. See also “Anamnesis,” *Online Etymological Dictionary*, [www.etymonline.com/word/anamnesis](http://www.etymonline.com/word/anamnesis).

<sup>25</sup> “amnesia,” *Online Etymological Dictionary*, [www.etymonline.com/word/amnesia](http://www.etymonline.com/word/amnesia).

of actions that domino into the future. The ancient Greek figure Prometheus possesses a name with a meaning related to protention. Prometheus is a portmanteau word combining *pro* (forward, in front of) and *methos* (to think, to learn)—thus, to think forward into the future, to learn to anticipate what is coming from out of the future.<sup>26</sup>

Attention, as the third term between retention and protention, can be understood as an important feature of the human mind whereby a person stretches and gives themselves to the present moment, to the here and now, to the task at hand, to the person who is currently facing them and waiting for a response. It is associated with the functions of concentration and observant care in the direction of the ephemeral temporal present. When brought to its full measure, attention provides an epicentric enclosure from the quaking of the past and the future.

As David Foster Wallace puts it in his last novel, *The Pale King*:

Ability to pay attention. It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf) and, in waves, a boredom like you’ve never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it’s like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom.<sup>27</sup>

If there was a motivational deficit for assessing the costs and benefits of paying attention, Wallace reveals the extent of its effects on an otherwise divided and distracted mind. But are there other ways to accomplish this kind of joy? And what other punishing states of mind stand in the way besides boredom that need to be withstood and transformed?

Regarding retention, the functions of memory can be severely debilitated by a traumatic loss in the past that becomes the focus of both obsession and avoidance. This kind of trauma

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<sup>26</sup> *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, op. cit., location 73554. See also “Prometheus,” *Online Etymological Dictionary*, [www.etymonline.com/search?q=prometheus](http://www.etymonline.com/search?q=prometheus).

<sup>27</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), p. 548.

can lead, depending on the level of guilt involved, to melancholia. Melancholics are routinely exhausted from the work of obsession and the efforts at avoidance so that there is little to nothing left for the present's demands—getting out of bed, taking a shower, paying attention to the moment at hand. Also, melancholics can lose their sense of wonder about the future, that is, they are certain that nothing will come out of the future except more pain and suffering. Thus, a traumatic past becomes the sole focus and monopolizes a person's mind at the *exclusion* of the lived present and future. Put another way, for the melancholic suffering from the wounds of grief and guilt present and future time collapse and arrest themselves, interrupting their usual flow. In the following passage, Denise Riley unpacks the phenomenon of arrested time as it relates to writing:

Looping around, I repeat myself, yet am compelled to keep trying to say it: to live on after a death, yet to live without inhabiting any temporal tense yourself, presents you with serious problems of what's describable. This may explain the paucity of accounts of arrested time. To struggle to narrate becomes...structurally impossible. Not because, as other people might reasonably assume, you are "too shocked" to wish to write a word, or because you are "in denial"—but because, as the movement of time halts for you, so do all customary "befores" and "afters" that underpin narration. A sentence slopes forward into its own future, as had your former intuition of a mobile time. But now your newly stopped time is stripped of that direction. Or rather, the whole notion of directedness has gone.<sup>28</sup>

The befores (of the past) and the afters (of the future) halt and disintegrate, not just for writing but for all activities undertaken in this state of arrested time, which is a central experience for someone suffering from pathological mourning. Regarding Riley's point about the struggle to write and narrate within this condition of atemporality, I address this challenge directly in chapter 5 where I examine an original writing prompt created specially to address this issue.

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<sup>28</sup> Denise Riley, *Say Something Back / Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2020), p. 109.

Regarding protention, the functions of imagination and anticipation can be compromised for a traumatized person who begins to overly worry about the future. This type of worry can be characterized as *anxiety*. If melancholia is oriented towards the past, anxiety is oriented to an inevitably frightening future, an oncoming catastrophe. This type of anxiety takes on as its object a myriad of things large and small but reaches its zenith at dread over the irredeemable loss of oneself and the death of loved ones that a person is ultimately powerless to stop.<sup>29</sup> In a chapter titled, “Anxiety, Authenticity, and Trauma,” Robert Stolorow addresses this topic by turning from the philosophical to the personal. In connection to the death of his wife, he writes:

Trauma shatters *the absolutisms of everyday life* that...evade and cover up the finitude, contingency, and embeddedness of our existence and the indefiniteness of its certain extinction. Such shattering exposes what had been heretofore concealed [...]. Before she died, Dede had, in a certain sense, been my “world.” [...] Her death tore me from the illusion of our infinitude (“I will love you forever,” we would often say to each other), and my world collapsed. [...] Loss of loved ones constantly impends on me as a certain, indefinite, and ever-present possibility, in terms of which I now always understand myself and my world.<sup>30</sup>

In anxiety, the person’s worry about the future takes precedence over everything else leaving nothing left for the past or the present. As a mirror of the relation of retention to melancholia, a fatal future becomes the sole focus and monopolizes a person’s mind at the *exclusion* of the

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<sup>29</sup> Heidegger argues that death enters through the individual and Critchley via Levinas argues that it comes through the death of others. Though I think Levinas’ and Critchley’s critique of Heidegger are valid, I would argue that death can enter from both poles of self and other, especially when a person identifies with and introjects a loved one. This kind of intertwining indicates the possibility of both mutual flourishing and mutual destruction. Both *identification* and *introjection* will be treated below in Chapters 3 and 4. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2008), Division II, Chapter 1. See also Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 130-139, hereafter abbreviated RTB. See also Simon Critchley, *How to Stop Living and Start Worrying* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 40.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Stolorow, *Trauma and Human Existence: Autobiographical, Psychoanalytic, and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 41. Italics mine.

past and present. The anxious person is dragged forward like a fish with a hook in his mouth; the more they resist, the more they suffer, until there is no fight left in them.

The disfigurement of the present is in some respects the direct result and response to the outer walls of past and future falling in towards the center where attention in the present gets buried beneath the rubble of arrested time. Stolorow's *absolutisms of everyday life* are akin to what I will refer to as *manic* denials of traumatic realities. For the person hobbled by intrusive, anxious thoughts and feelings about the future, the manic distancing from traumatic realities such as death creates a claustrophobic zone of perturbation and the concomitant urge to take flight from this zone. For the person suffering from melancholia, they become so exhausted and crippled by guilt that they experience an unendurable fatigue from moment to moment. With little to no energy left for the present, some melancholics sleep for long stretches and then still feel tired when they awaken. This type of sleeping-through-the-present is sometimes a precursor to the sleep of death in suicide, the nullification of all presents.<sup>31</sup>

Given this analysis, we can infer two things. For the pathological mourner, the trauma of arrested time is an important problem in need of a creative solution and attention is not easy or automatic but an accomplishment that is achieved by great effort and a sustained process of dismantling the obstacles that halt time's flow. As I will argue, engaging with poetry, where the poem itself is an important form of attention made manifest on the page, is a way of co-creating out of the materials of what remains in the destructive wake of melancholia and mania.

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<sup>31</sup> See A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990). Alvarez provides a useful summary of the connection between suicide and melancholia that I will explore further in later chapters. He states, "This is the vicious circle of melancholia, in which a man may take his own life partly to atone for his fantasied guilt for the death of someone he loves, and partly because he feels the dead person living on inside him, crying out, like Hamlet's father, for revenge." p.127.

## 1.2 Thesis Statement

This thesis examines significant interpretations of the biblical Akedah in the larger context of a literary and philosophical exploration of pathological mourning, the trauma and guilt that trigger it, and the ways in which literary art—various conceptions and practices of poetry—might provide some small form of amelioration for the sufferer. The work of mourning is a complex phenomenon that involves processing the loss of a loved one, which in turn enables the bereaved to live with who and what is lost. *Pathological* mourning, in the forms of mania and melancholia,<sup>32</sup> occurs when healthy mourning is interrupted by guilt, which can lead to self-destruction.<sup>33</sup> As a scene of profound love, loss, and betrayal, the Akedah is suggestive of the power of guilt and how it drives pathological mourning, making it an ideal text for the purposes of this study. Ultimately, this thesis offers a new reading and application of the Akedah in relation to the study of pathological mourning.

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<sup>32</sup> The concepts of mania and melancholia will be further analyzed in Chapters 3 and 4. It should be noted that modern medical conceptions and criteria for *depression* fall outside the scope of this thesis. Depression and Melancholia remain distinct conditions in the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. As Ohmae writes, “Depression and melancholia differ in terms of origin, psychopathology, and therapy. Before DSM-III, depression had not been considered as a diagnosis, but was a ubiquitous symptom that was seen in such conditions as neurasthenia, psychasthenia, nervousness, and neurosis. Melancholia has a history that reaches back to Hippocratic times.” The focus of my study on pathological mourning is specifically concerned with the analysis of mania and melancholia in Freudian psychoanalytic theory with only brief references to DSM-V as it concerns these concepts. See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5*. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013). See also, Susume Ohmae, “The Difference Between Depression and Melancholia: Two Distinct Conditions That Were Combined into a Single Category in DSM-III,” in *Seishin Shinkeigaku Zasshi*, volume 114, number 8, (2012): pp. 886-905.

<sup>33</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter 3, healthy mourning and melancholia share several characteristics in common making their clear demarcation sometimes difficult to assess. Also, the level or amount of guilt required for mourning to cross the threshold into melancholia is different for each person and context dependent. Experiences of grief and guilt are not measurable monoliths but instead exhibit heterogeneity making the changes from mourning to melancholia, from melancholia to mania, and from mania’s regression back to melancholia fluid and unpredictable. Thus, mourning and melancholia are not a rigid binary but more like a mutable species appearing within a genus.

Further, this thesis engages with Kierkegaardian<sup>34</sup> and Levinasian<sup>35</sup> motifs in order to clarify the contours of pathological mourning.<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard and Levinas, both important interpreters of the Akedah,<sup>37</sup> will be read against the grain in novel ways in order to demonstrate how each of their texts and ideas illuminate aspects of mania and melancholia, two concepts central to Freudian psychoanalytic theory.<sup>38</sup> From this critical and creative rapprochement with psychoanalysis, a space will be opened to rethink the promise of mourning in the face of overwhelming guilt. This promise of mourning—of healing, of loving again—will be approached through an analysis of the tasks of poetry in order to examine in what ways poetry might aid in the restoration of the movement of time to the pathological mourner and staunch

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<sup>34</sup> Motifs will be explored in FT.

<sup>35</sup> Motifs will be explored in several works by Emmanuel Levinas, i.e. *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), hereafter abbreviated OTB; “Substitution” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Critchley, et. al., (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996), hereafter abbreviated BPW; and RTB.

<sup>36</sup> There is long history of philosophical and literary reference to and exploration of melancholia and mania dating back at least to Plato’s discussion of mania in the *Phaedrus*. In more recent times, Walter Benjamin’s discussion of melancholia in part two of his *Trauerspiel* book, Blanchot’s meditations on disaster in *The Writing of the Disaster*, Judith Butler’s study of the social and political consequences of melancholia in *The Psychic Life of Power*, and W.G. Sebald’s literary exploration of melancholic themes in *The Rings of Saturn*, for example, have all shed light on aspects of melancholia and melancholy-like experiences. Given the specific focus of my thesis and the particular narrative I am exploring via Kierkegaard, Freud, and Levinas, these perspectives ultimately fall outside the scope of my project. See Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1995).; Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).; Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).; W.B. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> The Akedah has served as a Rorschach ink blot test for philosophers, that is, by examining how each philosopher responds to it we see what is truly important to them. For Example: reason in Kant, historical progress in Hegel, absurd faith in Kierkegaard, and ethics as first philosophy in Levinas. A Rorschach ink blot test is an example of a “projective test” which attempts to assess personality by “presenting people with ambiguous stimuli [like an ink blot] and requiring them to indicate how they would interpret each stimulus. The idea is that the reply will indicate some of the concerns of the individual’s unconscious mind—themes and events which particularly concern them at a subconscious level will be projected on to the ambiguous material,” which might be otherwise too painful for the conscious mind to approach directly. See Nicky Hayes and Peter Stratton, *A Student’s Dictionary of Psychology* (London: Arnold Publishers, 2003), pp. 221 and 248.

<sup>38</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *On Freud’s Mourning and Melancholia* (London: Karnac Books, 2009), hereafter abbreviated as MM.

their spiraling melancholia. Theoretical, practical, and performative aspects of poetry will be investigated, and an original manuscript of poems will follow the critical portion of the thesis.

When people act and react from distinctively manic defenses and melancholic moods, the potential exists for the obfuscation and justification of violent and traumatic acts. As Roger Johnson has shown,<sup>39</sup> religious violence has increased dramatically since the 1970s and the use of sacred texts like the Akedah taken together with the influence of religious leaders triumphantly “acting on voices”<sup>40</sup> continue to demonstrate the fine line between faith and pathological states of mind and the ways in which stories and poems, religious or otherwise, continue to influence people’s lives. It is imperative to analyze the psychological and conceptual features<sup>41</sup> that define melancholia and mania and the real-world violence that flows from these states in order to find meaningful alternatives and potentially therapeutic remedies. This dissertation is one such response to this imperative that offers both an analysis of and an alternative to the destructiveness of pathological mourning in the form of poetry that potentially sublimates and begins to heal the melancholic by paying attention to language and creating new conceptions, new poems, and new ways of talking about what it means to be a human being who is capable of confronting their guilt, wrestling with and restoring time’s flow, and forming new cathectic relationships with others.

This dissertation also responds to the long-standing debate amongst scholars over the range of polyvalent meanings surrounding Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah’s actions and states of

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<sup>39</sup> Roger Johnson, *Peacemaking and Religious Violence*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series. (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> David Hacker, et al., “Acting on Voices: Omnipotence, Sources of Threat, and Safety-seeking Behaviors,” in *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2008), 47, pp. 201-213.

<sup>41</sup> Concepts, i.e., ideas in the mind that facilitate a person to “grasp” (-cept, from Latin *cepare*, to seize hold of or grasp) the world and their place within it, are the vocabulary of thought and some people’s vocabularies are severely limited, which is to say they walk around with half-formed, vague, or otherwise incomplete concepts in their minds. What I term conceptual violence is a mix of ignorance and arrogance that occurs when a person wrongly assumes that they have clearly delimited a concept or exhausted its meaning while merely grasping a small part of it.

mind in the Akedah narrative. For example, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio, provides an innovative glimpse into the psychological anguish that Abraham suffers during his test of faith, but stops short of seeing the potential of the story to shed light on pathological mourning. Ultimately, de Silentio's treatise can be interpreted as treating the psychological elements of the Akedah as a means to furthering Kierkegaard's project of illuminating what it really means to become a Christian. De Silentio understands Abraham as the incomparable "father of faith," where faith requires a *crucifixion of the understanding* caused by an encounter with the *absurd paradox* of believing that Isaac must be bound, stabbed, and burnt to ash and that Isaac will still live, that is, be returned unharmed to Abraham in *this* life, perhaps in the very next moment.<sup>42</sup> For Kierkegaard, this ordeal foreshadows what faith demands in believing that the paradoxical God-man Jesus Christ died on the cross and was resurrected. Unconditional obedience to God's command regardless of the expected negative consequences to self and others is a central theme here. On this reading of the Akedah, the focus of Abraham's actions consists in total submission to God's judgment which, despite appearances and in direct opposition to reasonable standards of logic and morality, can never be wrong.<sup>43</sup> Is this merely a story about faith? Or can it also be read as a

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Adams claims that the key experience of Abraham is eschatological trust in God and the experience of *assurance*. In contrast to Adams, I would argue the concept of paradox is not only relevant to a devastating *cognitive* crisis, but also to an *emotional* one—the encounter with the absurd paradox is a central factor contributing to the debilitating experience of guilt at the heart of Abraham's double bind. Eschatological trust and the idea of resurrection do *not* provide reassurances of Isaac's survival. The paradox haunts the individual and the knight of faith remains an unattainable ideal, hence Abraham's and de Silentio's painful silences. The fact that there are no assurances in Abraham or Isaac's case makes the story truly horrifying. Again, the Elohist author's redaction is relevant here. See Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also Noel S. Adams, "Some Varieties of Interest, Task and Understanding in *Philosophical Fragments*" in *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook 2004* (Berlin: de Gruyter), pp. 117-138.

<sup>43</sup> For Kierkegaard, the meaning of faith is recognizing one's total dependence on God, which is the relation that determines all other relations: to self, to others, to life, and death. Kierkegaard's ethico-religious model is essentially heteronomous. In other words, the command or law (*nomos*) comes from a source other than (*hetero*) the individual human being, namely, God, who sets an impossible standard to follow, let alone fully understand. See Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for*

tale depicting a manic fantasy brought about by a mind broken by guilt? De Silentio's interpretation denies the possibility that the test of Abraham on Mount Moriah required *disobedience* as a criterion of faith and that Abraham's willingness to kill (and *de facto* obedience to the commandment taken literally) is a sign of hubris, pride,<sup>44</sup> or genuine mental illness, which is an interpretation found in some Talmudic commentaries on the Akedah and in certain Levinasian motifs. The question then becomes: what do obedience and disobedience mean in this context? Further, are there other compelling interpretations of the Akedah that Kierkegaard and others altogether *miss* in their analyses of the story? The answer is unquestionably *yes*. Despite the abundance of critical interpretations of the Akedah, this dissertation will provide an innovative way to construct meaning from Abraham's experience that sheds light on the phenomenon of pathological mourning, which will be facilitated by following and teasing out Kierkegaardian and Levinasian threads and reading these two significant philosophers in such a way that goes against their own stated goals and objectives.

Despite two lengthy monographs explicitly treating the relationship between Kierkegaard and Levinas, the conceptual linkages between traumatic loss, guilt, and pathological mourning in these philosophers' philosophical thoughts surrounding the Akedah have not been studied. The edited volume, *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics and Religion*,<sup>45</sup> does not attempt any rapprochement with psychoanalysis despite the importance of

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*the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1993).

<sup>44</sup> I refer here to W.H. Auden's insightful distinction between hubris and pride: "Hubris means believing that you *are* a god, i.e., that you cannot suffer; pride means a defiant attempt to become a god, when you secretly know that you are mortal creature. The classical tragic hero is blind; the Christian tragic hero deceives himself." See *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose*, Volume 2: 1939-1948 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 378. Given that Kierkegaard's project was distinctively Christian, we can assume that the concept of "pride" was operable (or at least available) in his interpretive approach to the Akedah.

<sup>45</sup> J. Simmons and David Wood, *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics and Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

psychological insight in Kierkegaard's major works and Levinas' explicit adoption of psychological terminology in his later writings. Westphal's *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue* does a fine job of exploring how both philosophers' conception of the ethical-religious life is traumatizing for the individual but stops short of making any connection with melancholia or mania, two concepts that have proven fruitful in exploring how both people and texts can self-destruct in response to trauma.<sup>46</sup> The edited volume, *Re-Reading Levinas*, devotes one chapter to the potential connection between Levinas and psychoanalytical concepts, but focuses specifically on the application of Francois Roustang's theory of psychosis as a parallel to Levinas' concept of the persecuted self.<sup>47</sup> Again, the exploration of melancholia and mania in connection to Levinas is altogether missing.

Critchley's *Infinitely Demanding*<sup>48</sup> and Butler's *Precarious Life*<sup>49</sup> question whether Levinas' conception of ethics is too demanding and ultimately self-defeating but miss the role guilt plays in the process. As for Kierkegaard, there are several essays and articles that point to a creative link with Freudian concepts, for example, Kerrigan's "Superego in Kierkegaard, Existence in Freud."<sup>50</sup> Despite its promising beginning, the essay completely ignores Freud's early writings, including his 1915 paper on mania and melancholia, which I will argue contains important concepts that are helpful in understanding how human mourning can be derailed by guilt.

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<sup>46</sup> M. Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Noreen O'Connor, "Who Suffers?" in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

<sup>48</sup> Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2004).

<sup>50</sup> William Kerrigan, "Superego in Kierkegaard, Existence in Freud," in *Kierkegaard's Truth* (Binghamton: Vail-Ballou Press, 1981).

### 1.3 Methodology

This thesis applies a hermeneutic approach broadly construed to provide an intertextual analysis of historically situated motifs and concepts from the Hebraic biblical tradition and the European philosophical and psychological traditions, that include binding, trauma, guilt, mania, melancholia, mourning, and poetry. As an interdisciplinary project, this approach will also be supplemented by theology, literary criticism, and poetics. While I will think critically *about* poetry in Chapter 5, in the first four chapters I will be applying a poetic treatment *to* the central theological and philosophical texts of my study by approaching them as poem-like in some cases and approaching them through poems in others.

As a project of interpretation, the dissertation is distinctively philosophical at its foundation. The method of philosophy as I understand and apply it is threefold: 1) to pay attention to language and analyze key concepts for the purpose of clarification; 2) to produce, evaluate, and sometimes challenge arguments for the purpose of justification; and 3) to apply 1 and 2 in the service of wondering about and attempting to answer, however partial and provisional, important and relevant questions for the purpose of illumination. The questions at the heart of this dissertation exist at the intersection of *psychology* (what is pathological mourning and how can it be better understood and dealt with?), *ethics* (how can I live in the shadow of guilt?), *philosophy of religion* (how might the biblical Akedah be reinterpreted yet again and how does this new interpretation compares to other interpretations?), *history of philosophy* (what motifs from significant thinkers like Kierkegaard and Levinas can be reappropriated and re-envisioned?), *literary criticism* (how can a close reading of the Akedah story and the story of *Agnete and the Merman* shed light on pathological mourning?), and

*poetics* (what is the nature and purpose of poetry and how can it possibly provide therapeutic relief to those struggling with mania and melancholia?).

In terms of qualitative research, this thesis includes addenda of two impactful interviews with experts in the theory and practice of literary art, namely, Richard Kearney, who holds the Charles B. Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College, and Bret Anthony Johnston, who is the former Director of Creative Writing at Harvard University and the current Director of the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin. Thanks to a generous grant from the Center for Peacemaking in Milwaukee, I was able to travel to Harvard and UT-Austin to conduct the interviews in person. While at Harvard I also attended a small event with Margaret Atwood, who spoke on craft and why she writes. While at UT-Austin, I spent a day in the archives of the Harry Ransom Center reading some of the private papers, journals, and correspondences of James Joyce, Anne Sexton, and David Foster Wallace, in order to further explore their conceptions of the nature and purpose of literary art.

This thesis also includes an original English translation from the Danish of Jens Baggesen's long poem titled "Agnete fra Holmegaard" ("Agnete from Holmegaard"), only the second English translation on record and the first since 1863. It also includes an original translation of an important section of Hans Christian Andersen's 1834 dramatic poem titled "Agnete og Havmanden" ("Agnete and the Merman") in order to simultaneously critique Kierkegaard's understanding of Abraham and Agnete story. These translations make possible new interpretations and critiques that help to explore the topography of pathological mourning that in turn helps to reinterpret the Akedah in a novel way.

### 1.31 Researcher Positionality

Philosophy is a polysemous concept to be sure. Etymologically, philosophy means the *love* of wisdom. I do not claim to know what the whole of love is, but I would argue that an essential part of love is *passion*, which at its core means *to suffer*—to suffer for who or what you love—as a mother suffers for their child or a musician for their performance. Wisdom, another polysemous term, is in my estimation not just knowing the truth, but doing it, that is, *acting* on what we *know* to be true, beautiful, and good, even when it is inconvenient or when no one is watching.<sup>51</sup> This takes great commitment and sacrifice; wisdom is the hard-won harmony of thought and deed. The conception of philosophy outlined here underpins this thesis. Thus, my interest in pathological mourning—its causes, courses, and cures—is not solely theoretical, but also takes into consideration my own practical, personal, and professional experiences with it and with poetry.

I think somewhere at the heart of pathological mourning is a phenomenon that gives credence to the everyday expression *when they died a part of me died too*. It is my own personal experience of the truth of this expression that continues to motivate my interest in studying the complex inner workings of pathological mourning. The fact that pathological mourning and the traumatic loss that underlies it *grind life to a halt* for many people means there is an urgent need to better understand this condition and how it might be ameliorated.

In my capacity as poet, I have written a manuscript of poems that deals directly with my evolving theoretical understanding and personal experience with pathological mourning. These

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. “wisdom, n.” 2a. OED online. [www-oed.com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/229491](http://www-oed.com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/229491).

poems are co-expressive and co-extensive with the critical portion of this thesis, each responsive and influenced by the other.

In my capacity as Director of Survivor Empowerment at LOTUS Legal Clinic, I design and implement programming with the goal of empowering survivors of sexual violence and human trafficking. For two programs in particular, I lead trauma-informed creative writing workshops for survivors across Wisconsin. I also edit *Untold Stories*, a literary magazine that publishes survivor writings paired with university students' art responses. These pairings are powerful in their witness and help to create empathy, awareness, catharsis, and social and legal change. Specific experiences and interactions with my clients will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

#### 1.4 Outline of the Chapters to Follow

The following quotations are linked. They begin with an assessment of the Akedah and end with an indication of the possibility and promise of poetry. Taken together, they illustrate the trajectory of this research project.

In the first quotation, Elie Wiesel alerts the reader to the dangers lying at the heart of the Akedah and the way it depicts harm to its central characters. Wiesel states:

Why this legend [of the Akedah]? It has a meaning. Abraham thought that the *Akedah* was a matter between himself and God, or perhaps between himself and his son. He was wrong. There is an element of the unknown in every injustice, in every adventure involving total commitment. One imposes suffering on a friend, a son, in order to win who knows what battle, to prove who knows what theories, and in the end someone else pays the price – and that someone is almost always innocent. Once the injustice has been committed, it eludes our control. All things considered, Abraham was perhaps wrong in obeying, or even in making believe that he was obeying. By including Isaac

in an equation he could not comprehend, by playing with Isaac's suffering, he became unwittingly an accomplice in his wife's death.<sup>52</sup>

To borrow a modern expression, Isaac is not collateral damage of the dialogue between Abraham and God, but the intended target.<sup>53</sup> Committing to the sacrifice and the secrecy, his betrayal of Sarah was *inevitable*. Abraham does not properly discriminate between guilty combatants and innocent non-combatants, thereby becoming guilty himself. He inconceivably takes aim at a child with no goal in mind other than obeying divine authority. On Wiesel's reading of the Akedah, this unjust act of destruction has *effects that cannot be controlled*. The shock of Abraham's act unhinges his wife Sarah. It is not far-fetched to hear in Wiesel's commentary of the Akedah a veiled allusion to the infamous Nuremburg defense that kept the ovens of the Shoah filled with innocent victims: "I was only obeying orders" claimed Nazi perpetrators. It is also telling that Wiesel subtitles his Akedah commentary "A Survivor's Story" and emphasizes the connection between the burnt offering God requires of Abraham and the primary meaning of the word "holocaust."<sup>54</sup> As Hannah Arendt and Stanley Milgram have shown, this particular kind of evil demands research and analysis so that it might be better understood and withstood. Milgram's research in particular highlights how people are vulnerable to the fallacy of the inappropriate appeal to authority and how much guilt and regret follows from directly or indirectly harming innocent people.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), p. 94.

<sup>53</sup> See entry on "War," specifically the section on just war theory, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/war/>.

<sup>54</sup> Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, op. cit., p.71. See also *Online Etymology Dictionary* entry for "holocaust," which states: "from Late Latin *holocaustum*, from Greek *holokauston* "a thing wholly burnt," neuter of *holokaustos* "burned whole," from *holos* "whole" (from PIE root *sol-* "whole, well-kept") + *kaustos*, verbal adjective of *kaiein* "to burn" (see *caustic*)." [Etymonline.com/word/holocaust](http://etymonline.com/word/holocaust)

<sup>55</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964); See also Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

In the second quotation, Levinas explores what it means to be ethical, which for him demands taking responsibility for other human beings and protecting them from harm. The central ethical acts require suffering and *self*-sacrifice. To go beyond the ethical is to court evil and its aftermath, which is precisely what he thinks Abraham did when he decided to make an incision in Isaac's throat. Levinas writes:

[T]he face of the other signifies above all else a demand. The face requires you, calls you outside. And already there resounds the word from Sinai, "though shalt not kill," which signifies "you shall defend the life of the other." An order from God, or an echo, or the mystery of that order, "you will answer for the other!" It is the very articulation of the love of the other. You are indebted to someone...and *you* are responsible, the only one who could answer, the noninterchangeable, and the unique one. Within responsibility there is election, the original constitution of the I, and the revelation of its ethical meaning. I am chosen. But the other, the loved one, the loved one as loved, is unique to the world.<sup>56</sup>

For Levinas, nothing justifies killing and we must do everything in our non-violent power to let others live.<sup>57</sup> In another context, Levinas describes a person's responsibility to the other person, both their life and death, as a *persecution* that results in the traumatic experience of being held *hostage* by the other person. He states, "Persecution [by the living other] reduces the ego...to the *absolute accusative* whereby the ego is accused of a *fault*...which *disturbs* its freedom [...]."<sup>58</sup> If this is what happens in an ethical relationship with the beloved *living* other, then what would it mean to be persecuted by the beloved other you destroyed? What happens when you experience unrelenting guilt over the other's death and cannot mourn? If there is persecution in life, what kind of persecution would there be in pathologically mourning the irreversible death of someone you loved and think yourself to be the proximate or remote cause of their death?<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Levinas, RTB, p. 192.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 123-24.

<sup>58</sup> Levinas, BPW, p. 183

<sup>59</sup> If for Kierkegaard, God is the middle term between self and other, then for Levinas one only approaches God by taking responsibility for and loving the other person. In this Levinasian context, it

In a final quotation, I turn to contemporary research on the ability of literary art to create meaning and empathy as a way to deal with the intractable suffering involved in human life, including the self-destructiveness of guilt that initiates pathological mourning. According to Gottschall, the defining feature of all stories, sacred or otherwise, is the theme of trouble.<sup>60</sup> The *function* that all stories share is “giving us practice in dealing with the big dilemmas of human life.”<sup>61</sup> There are *skills* to be practiced at the heart of a great poem or story, including empathy.

As Johnston states:

We participate in what are basically plays. Whether it’s a novel or a poem or whatever, we participate in these plays as a way of experiencing emotions. We play within the play. We empathize so that if, God forbid, we ever go through any of these experiences we know that we’re not alone (even if the characters are imaginary) and we know that we can survive them. And I think that’s the power of what we’re dealing with. It teaches you that you can survive and there has to be catharsis in that, there has to be redemption in that. There has to be a feeling of community.<sup>62</sup>

There is an audaciousness to this kind of play, and it is no coincidence that the literary technique of *allusion* so often used in poetry contains the word *ludere* (Latin, to play), which is the same root found in the word *ludicrous*. In allusion, it is as if one poem is speaking directly to another poem, one poet responding to another in the shared experience of playing with language and creating new perspectives and meanings. That the writing, reading, and sharing of poems has the power to connect us to others and create new depths of understanding between persons by

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could be argued that beyond this ethical relationship with the other, talk of God becomes superfluous. This could include the radical possibility of letting go certain conceptions of God as the subject or object of love, but instead emphasizing the possibility that God is love or love is God. Or as Meister Eckhart put the matter in a paradoxical prayer: I pray God to rid me of God. In my reading of Levinas against the grain in later chapters, I might amend this prayer to say: I pray to God to rid me of guilt. See Meister Eckhart, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart’s Creation Spirituality in New Translation*, Introduction and Commentaries by Matthew Fox (New York: Image Books, 1991), p. 201.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company, 2013), p. 48.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>62</sup> Personal interview with Bret Anthony Johnston, see addendum A.

paying attention to language, is a serious opportunity for the pathological mourner who remains trapped in their own solipsistic sphere of unrelenting grief and guilt.

I will turn directly to the poem-like story of Abraham and Isaac in Chapter 2 in order to survey the myriad interpretations of it. This detailed exploration of the story and its many meanings will set the stage for my interpretation and engagement with it in relation to pathological mourning. In Chapter 3, I will begin my analysis of pathological mourning by turning to Freudian concepts and Levinasian motifs in order to explore the kind of narcissism at the center of melancholia and the possibility of reading Levinas' philosophy of substitution as a discourse on melancholia's grim beginnings and inner workings.<sup>63</sup>

In order to examine mania and its relation to melancholia, Chapter 4 will take as its starting point motifs found in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* giving special focus on the use of the story of Agnete and the merman in Problema III. This will be followed by an original translation and elucidation of Jens Baggesen's long poem from 1808 titled, "Agnete fra Holmegaard: A Ballad," and Hans Christian Andersen's short lyric poem from 1834 titled, "Agnete's Lullaby," taken from his play *Agnete and the Merman*. At the end of Chapter 4, the Akedah will be revisited in light of what was learned from Agnete's tragic journey. It is here that I will sketch a new interpretation of the Akedah that extends the story's boundaries and in turn elucidates central aspects of pathological mourning.

In Chapter 5, a third way between mania and melancholia will be developed that explores the literary art of poetry as a possible response to pathological mourning. In particular, the nature and purposes of poetry will be examined in relation to melancholia and mania. Keeping with psychoanalytic themes, it is the hope that this examination sheds light (however

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<sup>63</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction,"* ed. Joseph Sandler, et. al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), hereafter abbreviated as ON. See also Levinas, OTB. pp. 99-129.

small) on how poetry, both in theory and in practice, might contribute to the process of healthy mourning.

The sixth and final chapter concludes with an original manuscript of poems titled, *No Wonder*, that was written simultaneously and in the margins of the critical portion of the thesis. In a mutually beneficial way, the writing of the critical portion assisted in the writing of the creative portion and vice versa. These poems enact, extend, and in some cases, elevate this study of pathological mourning and the tasks of poetry in a meaningfully personal way.

## CHAPTER TWO | THE AKEDAH AND ITS INTERPRETATIONS

### 2.1 Introduction

א. וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה  
אֶת אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:  
ב. וַיֹּאמֶר קַח נָא אֶת בְּנֶךְ אֶת יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר  
אַהֲבָתָּ אֶת יִצְחָק וְלֵךְ אֶל אֶרֶץ מֹרְיָה  
וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ:

*Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, “Abraham,” and he answered, “Here I am.” And He said, “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.”<sup>64</sup>*

In this chapter, I will outline and examine the ancient Hebrew story of the attempted sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham in Genesis chapter 22. In particular, I will focus attention on the major theological and philosophical interpretations that have come to surround the literal rendering of the Akedah. Since at its core the Akedah is a story, I will start my analysis by looking at the concept of story in relation to poetry and how they both contrast with fiction. With these conceptual distinctions in mind, I will then survey the major interpretations of the Akedah paying special attention to the story’s ambiguities and nuances. This approach will be useful for understanding and appreciating the Akedah’s scope and reach while also carving out a space for potential new meanings and uses of the story.

It is clear that Berman’s classic treatment of the Akedah is incomplete and needs to be revisited and supplemented with feminist and transgender readings. These necessary perspectives and critiques deepen our understanding of the traumatic losses at the core of the story, alert us to the voices that have been excluded, and provide innovative ways to reinterpret and reimagine the Akedah—all things which I hope to emulate in my own reading of the text.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Genesis 22:1-2*, op. cit., p. 31. Hebrew text retrieved from [www.chabad.org/library/bible](http://www.chabad.org/library/bible).

<sup>65</sup> Berman, op. cit.

This updated critical survey will attempt to elucidate the central characteristics and meanings of the Akedah, which will lay the important groundwork for the encounter with Kierkegaardian and Levinasian motifs that will be taken up in the next chapter. Ultimately, the Akedah will be evaluated for its vivid depictions of the violence, traumatic loss, and personal guilt that encircle Abraham in order to deepen our understanding of pathological mourning and to re-envision the Akedah itself.

## 2.2 On Stories

In an essay titled, “Don’t Write What You Know,” Johnston states, “Stories aren’t about things. They *are* things. Stories aren’t about actions. Stories are, unto themselves, actions.”<sup>66</sup> One way to interpret these remarks is to say that stories are things that act and are acted upon. In this conception, the attention paid to the people, places, and plot the writer imagines and faithfully attempts to represent, is extended to the space of the story itself, which through its own kind of autonomous existence that brims with linguistic potential exceeds the author’s own intentions for the text and sometimes transcends their conceptions of what a story is and can be. Because of this the story offers an occasion for wonder and work, and the writer, following their curiosity and never fully in control, writes towards surprise and the possibility of illumination, that is, to see something in a *new* light or to see something *for the first time*.

Regarding one of the central characteristics of stories, Kearney argues that “every story shares the common function of *someone telling something to someone about something*.”<sup>67</sup> In

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<sup>66</sup> Bret Anthony Johnston, “Don’t Write What You Know,” *The Writer’s Notebook II: Craft Essays from Tin House* (New York: Tin House Books, 2012). p. 22.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 5.

this way, there is always an audience, real or implied, that stories intrinsically seek. Ultimately, Kearney claims that a story is the “quintessentially communicative act.”<sup>68</sup> For Johnston, the ideal function of a story is to create the opportunity for the exercise of empathy and the ideal encounter with a story consists in curiosity rather than judgment.<sup>69</sup> Johnston’s conception of story, like Kearney’s, emphasizes story’s potential for genuine connection. But like all ideals and possibilities, there are contingencies and obstacles complicating story’s ability to realize its full potential.

In this context, Plato’s analysis of writing in the *Phaedrus* is relevant. Here Plato explains how a person’s ideas are like their very own children that are born through thinking and speaking and then lovingly developed through face-to-face dialogue with others. However, when a person writes down their ideas, their children become bastards, that is, they are abandoned by their parent and sent off into the world where they are vulnerable to the abuses of misinterpretation and misappropriation. Plato writes:

When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn’t know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.<sup>70</sup>

Stories have a life of their own and, like all life, are exposed to the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”<sup>71</sup> Ever the allegorist, Plato is using a provocative metaphor here: stories are children. This personification challenges the writer to see their story as something to be protected, solicitously looked after, but also (and this is equally important as children go) to be a partner in play. Stories are precious, fragile, and full of potential. But the world is not a

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Personal interview with Bret Anthony Johnston, see addendum A.

<sup>70</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, op. cit. p. 81 275D-275E.

<sup>71</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 81.

playground. It is a place where tragedy flourishes daily and child molesters exist in every community. As Wittgenstein later wrote about the poor reception of his own writing, it is a “shitty world,” and thus one writes at their own risk.<sup>72</sup>

If stories are valuable and vulnerable things, then they are “things that get told” as Gass points out.<sup>73</sup> Gass provides a useful conceptual analysis of *story* and in doing so argues that “fiction is story’s polar opposite, though that does not mean they do not need one another, live in the same sphere, or have no common qualities.”<sup>74</sup> The first distinguishing property of a story is that it “gets on with it,” that is, it is straightforward and economical with language to the point of being terse.<sup>75</sup> Gass gives the examples of the biblical story of Jonah and the fairy tale of Jack and the Beanstalk as illustrative. Regarding the adventures of Jonah, Gass avers that it is a story “about as brief as one dare to be.”<sup>76</sup> Perhaps, but Gass is already missing a crucial distinction at this early point in his analysis. The characteristics of intense compression, the focus on a single character’s point of view, and the use of vivid imagery, for example, are all part of the power of a good poem too. Likewise, Gass’ conception of story and poems in general both require a close reading because *every word counts*. Thus, a clear distinction between Gass’ conception of story, short lyric poems, and prose poetry is difficult to maintain and open to challenge.<sup>77</sup> Blurring these boundaries between story and poem allows several central aspects of poetry, for example, form, tone, allusion, and analogy, to inform how we read and understand the story.

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<sup>72</sup> Quoted in George Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought: From Hellenism to Celan* (New York: A New Directions Book, 2011), p.164.

<sup>73</sup> William H. Gass, “The Nature of Narrative and its Philosophical Implications,” in *Tests of Time* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>75</sup> Gass could have very well wrote that a story *gets it on* as he humorously and memorably argues that a “story is eager to reach its climax; fiction is all foreplay.” *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>77</sup> As we will see with the Akedah, the story of Abraham and Isaac can be approached as a poem, which is important for this study.

It has been said that Ernest Hemingway claimed to have written the world's shortest short story, which is composed of six words: For sale: baby's shoes, never worn.<sup>78</sup> A good story, like a good poem, is *highly suggestive* and therefore requires an active role from the reader.<sup>79</sup> What Hemingway's story requires is an act of the imagination on the part of the reader to fill in the details the story only hints at: the death of the infant, the grief of the parents, perhaps the agonizing questions as to why God would allow such suffering or if he exists at all, and the ways in which this tragedy can be interpreted as a symbol of the brevity and fragility of all life. The space between the lines of the poem, its silences and pauses, are just as important as the words themselves because of what they communicate. Once these inferences are drawn out, the reader is invested in the story as they have shared in the work of its telling. I would argue that at the heart of Gass' conception of story and poetry is the necessity to co-create meaning by both writer and reader that is unique in its intensity of attention to language.

To illustrate this tenuous demarcation between story and poetry, compare Hemingway's short story to A.R. Ammons' short poem titled "Beautiful Woman":

The spring  
in  
  
her step  
has  
  
turned to  
fall<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous & Obscure*, ed. Rachel Fershleiser and Larry Smith (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), p. v.

<sup>79</sup> Willard Spiegelman, *How to Read and Understand Poetry* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> A.R. Ammons, *Brink Road* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), Kindle.

This is one simple sentence in English enjambed into three distinct couplet-stanzas that form the poem. Just below the literal meaning of a woman stumbling and falling is a flash of insight comparing the change of seasons from spring to fall to a woman growing older. The phrase “turned to / fall” can be read as meaning *for the purpose of falling*, which is to suggest that the woman purposely accepts herself at every stage of her life and is graceful in embracing the inevitability of aging and dying.<sup>81</sup> It could be argued that it is precisely this that makes her beautiful in the poet’s eyes.

In addition, the mention of “fall” and “woman” in the same poem can be interpreted as an allusion to biblical motifs, which opens up possibilities for theological reflection and critique, especially regarding interpretations surrounding Eve in Genesis. The poem might be interpreted as praising her grace and wisdom and simultaneously undermining the view that she is *qua* woman sinful or evil. The pauses after each line and between stanzas act similarly to the double caesura of colon and comma in Hemingway’s story, namely, they provide a rhythm and pulse to the reading and breathing and they alert the reader to slow down, pay attention, and do the work of empathy and imagination.<sup>82</sup> This a unique feature of poems that maintains a space for readers to explore the polysemy of words and the ambiguities of the text that enable varied and valuable interpretations to come to light.

Here is another example of a short poem by W.S. Merwin titled, “Separation,” that further illustrates the collapsing of distance between story and poem. It reads in its entirety:

Your absence has gone through me  
Like thread through a needle.

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<sup>81</sup> Spiegelman, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Craig Teicher, “The Complete Poems of A.R. Ammons Amount to a Profound Experience of Empathy,” *The Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 5, 2018, [www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-ar-ammons-20180105-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-ar-ammons-20180105-story.html). Teicher writes of “Beautiful Woman,” “At first glance, this might look like light verse, but it’s deep and rich, a kind of Zen koan that is also a meditation on aging and, to me at least, longevity in marriage.”

Everything I do is stitched with its color.<sup>83</sup>

Here we have two short sentences and a compelling analogy that speaks so much in such little space. I would posit that this short poem can be read as a haunting reflection on pathological mourning. As I will explore in much greater detail in the next chapter, the irretrievable absence of the loved person that the melancholic feels responsible for causing, initiates a process whereby a composite image of the absent beloved made of memory and fantasy becomes a crucial part of the melancholic's identity, painfully stitched into the fabric of the wounded psyche influencing and distorting everything it thinks, feels, and does. Just like Hemingway's story and the Akedah itself, much is said and unsaid in this form of compressed expression.

Missing this chance to examine the ways his conception of story compares to poetry, Gass turns to a detailed analysis of how a story contrasts with fiction. If a story is partially defined by its intense compression, then fiction fills in the details. Gass compares the biblical treatment of Jonah's ordeal in the belly of a fish that consists of eleven lines of brief description<sup>84</sup> to Guy Davenport's fictional version of the ordeal that uses about as many lines to describe Jonah's beard.<sup>85</sup> Like the Jonah story, the Akedah elides these sorts of details as well, but if we look, for example, to Kierkegaard's treatment of it in *Fear and Trembling* then we see an attempt to flesh out in a fictional recreation the hell that Abraham and Isaac lived through.<sup>86</sup>

According to Gass, a *good* story manipulates the contingent flow of human life and reframes it as a causal sequence of events where prior actions are responsible for later ones in a clear, linear fashion.<sup>87</sup> As Richard Kearney states: "[when we] emplot our lives instead of

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<sup>83</sup> W. S. Merwin, *The Second Four Books of Poems* (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1993).

<sup>84</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., pp. 1038-1039.

<sup>85</sup> Gass, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

<sup>86</sup> Kierkegaard, FT.

<sup>87</sup> Gass, op. cit., pp. 14-17.

telling things one thing *after* another [...], as Aristotle says in the *Poetics*, you tell things one thing *because* of another [...] [and this causal] connection makes for the plot.”<sup>88</sup> This causal sequence culminates in a necessary goal as the story “flies like an arrow toward [its] moral.”<sup>89</sup> In short, stories possess the essential characteristic that Aristotle elucidates in his *Physics*, namely, *entelechy*, which signifies the process by which a thing moves toward its predetermined endpoint and fulfills its purpose.<sup>90</sup> Like an acorn that actualizes its potential in becoming an oak tree, a good story has a purpose it aims to realize in a process that unfolds on the page for the reader.<sup>91</sup>

For Gass, one of the main purposes of a story is to console its audience. The consolation of storytelling is that it shows how human lives are meaningful and justified in the face of painful trials and tribulations. No matter how horrific the journey, a good story always has a positive ending and a message to be heeded.<sup>92</sup> This aspect is sometimes flaunted in fiction to agonizing effect. For example, in David Foster Wallace’s expansive novel, *Infinite Jest*, after 1,078 pages (which includes 96 pages of endnotes) the story ends without explaining what happens to the protagonist providing no resolution and leaving the meaning of the epic journey incomplete and ambiguous.<sup>93</sup> To use Wallace’s own analysis here, unlike a painting, even a very large one, that can be viewed “all at once,” a long novel makes the burden of proof go up for the writer since it is so effort- and time-consuming for the reader who must return to the

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<sup>88</sup> Personal interview with Richard Kearney, see Addendum B.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, Book III, trans. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 201a10.

<sup>91</sup> Poems often use hypotaxis (statements of conjunction often characterized by causal or chronological relationships) as their primary form of expression, but as I will show in my discussion of paratactic poems in Chapter 5, they need not to. See, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, ed. M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage, 2009), pp. 350-351.

<sup>92</sup> Gass, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>93</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1996).

work *again and again* over long periods of time to experience it as a whole.<sup>94</sup> To go the distance with a long work of fiction and not find closure of any kind is, to be sure, a letdown, which is perhaps how it mirrors real life in ways that stories do not. By contrast, Gass summarizes:

We all love stories; it seems a harmless pleasure. [...] Stories run on patterns and regularity, imitate causality (even if by magical means), and comfort us because they mean something; they show lives and actions going somewhere, behavior punished and rewarded as seems proper. Stories are restorative. If they have unsettled beginnings, their endings come to a solid stand still.<sup>95</sup>

It should be added here that poems, like stories, can be rendered to restore who or what was lost or threatens to become lost. But unlike stories, poems can be written in fragments, embrace opacity, and refuse closure, yet still be cathartic.<sup>96</sup> In only some interpretations of the Akedah does the text operate the way Gass describes here. Biblical texts that contain an encounter between humans and God like the Akedah does, can be read as an attempt to provide a perspective that offers ultimate answers to life's perennial questions that might otherwise remain unanswered. But as we will see with other interpretations of the Akedah, an apparently divine encounter can be read otherwise.

In this vein, Gass states that in stories the "miraculous is naturalized."<sup>97</sup> To write about Jonah living inside the whale or Jack climbing the towering stalk into the heavens is "as easy as dreaming."<sup>98</sup> Unfortunately, Gass does not spell out why the miraculous is a familiar trope in storytelling but merely points out its ubiquitous presence and moves on. I would argue it is connected with the efficacy that a divine agent possesses in guiding the action to the positive outcome the reader sees jostling in the balance. Omnipotence<sup>99</sup> is quite literally the most useful

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<sup>94</sup> "Interview with David Foster Wallace," *The Charlie Rose Show*, PBS, March 27, 1997.

<sup>95</sup> Gass, op. cit., p. 26

<sup>96</sup> This line of thought will be developed in Chapter 5.

<sup>97</sup> Gass, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> The destructive side of omnipotence will be analyzed in the context of mania in Chapter 4.

characteristic to possess in getting a story to its destination.<sup>100</sup> I would also argue that Gass leaves his reference to dreaming undetermined and ambiguous. As I will attempt to show in Chapter 4, dreaming in the context of pathological mourning can be a treacherous endeavor.

At this point, let us take stock of this conceptual analysis. To put it schematically I will use a triangle model to visually summarize the results (see Figure 2).<sup>101</sup> The first point of the triangle on the lower left is the *sign* of the concept, that is, the word in a natural language that names the concept, which in this case is Gass' use of "story."<sup>102</sup> The second point of the triangle at the top center is what names the essential properties and qualities that define the concept and which all examples and instantiations of the concept have in common.<sup>103</sup> These include the following characteristics: economy of language, compression and suggestiveness, a causal sequence of events, purposefulness, the presence of the miraculous, and closure/consolation. The third point of the triangle on the lower right names the *referents*, that is, examples that can be pointed to as illustrative of the concept.

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<sup>100</sup> It is not wholly unrelated to mention Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of emotions in this context. As an atheist, Sartre is interested in analyzing the ways in which human beings express their creative and intellectual powers to adapt to the world and fashion it for their projects in the space opened up by God's death. An example of this is illustrated in Aesop's fable "The Fox and the Grapes." A fox, who sees a mouth-watering bunch of grapes ripe for the picking, tries everything in his power to reach them but ultimately fails. As he gives up trying to acquire the grapes, he states scornfully that they are sour and not worth his time. Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, trans. V.S. Vernon Jones (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2007), Kindle, location 281.

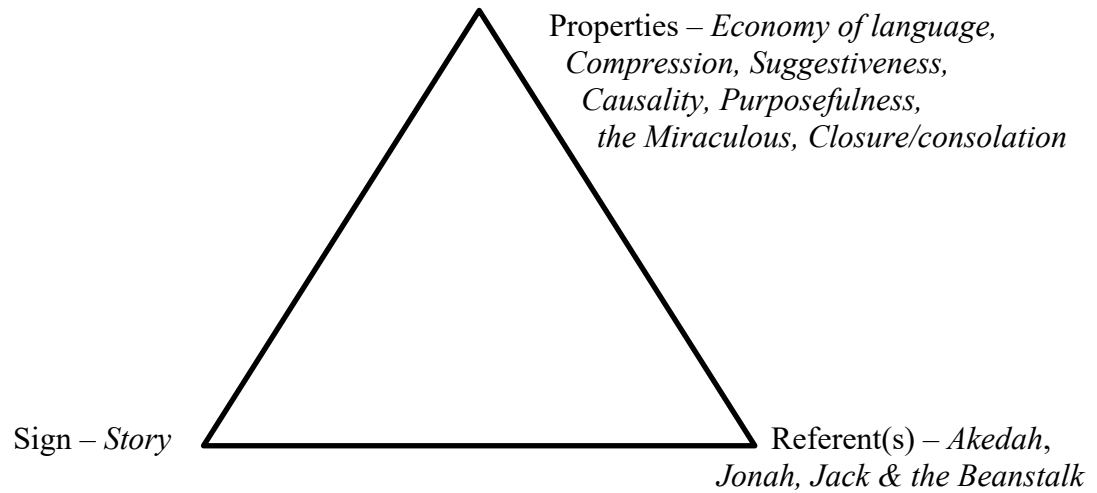
Sartre cites this as a paradigmatic example of how emotion is utilized to "magically transform the world" so that it better fits our situation. Disgust and anger act as a shield to protect the fox from the hostile world beyond his control that threatens to undermine him. The end result of the magical transformation is the world reconfigured through a fiction and cemented with the conviction of an emotional intelligence that, according to Sartre at least, knows exactly what it is doing. For the pathological mourner, a similar but more pernicious kind of delusory omnipotence magically transforms the world of the melancholic. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Philosophical Library, n.d.), Kindle, p. 37.

<sup>101</sup> John Chaffee, *Thinking Critically* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), pp. 281-282.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 2**  
Concept Triangle Analysis of Story

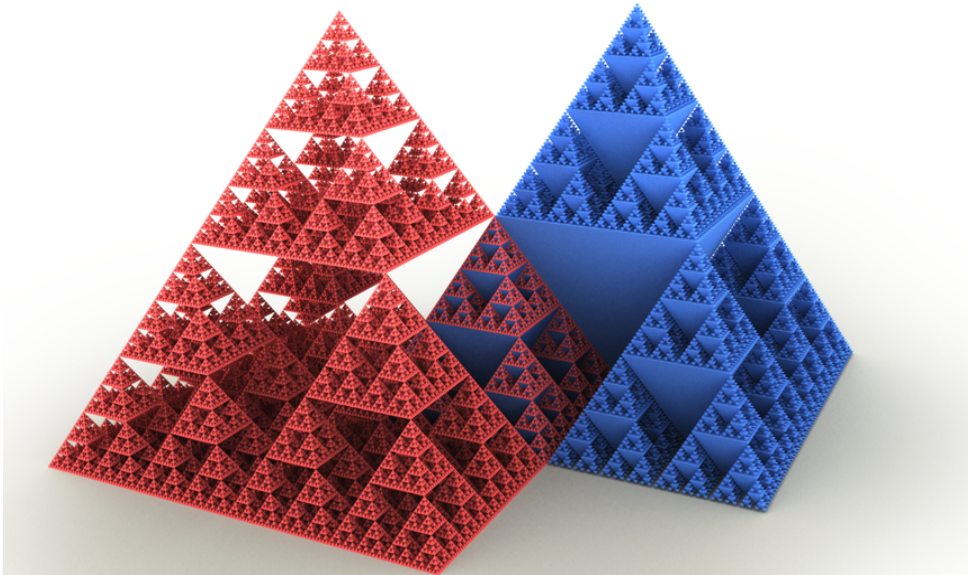


Like the two-dimensional circles that make up a Venn diagram and analyze the relationships between things or groups of things, the two-dimensional triangle above oversimplifies the complexity of a concept's boundaries. As illustrated above, story and poem are more intertwined than Gass realizes. The poem has points of contact with story both in terms of properties and referents, which raises the questions of how to classify and approach the text. Ultimately, the creative writer and critical reader get to decide, which is part of the work of literary art—to push boundaries and reconfigure ideas.

Due to the ever-evolving polysemy of language, a concept is less like a two-dimensional triangle and more like a three-dimensional pyramid pulsing with life and always moving within a web of signifiers and signifieds. In contrast to Venn's diagram and Chaffe's triangle model, I would suggest using two overlapping Sierpiński pyramids to better visualize the complexity of concepts (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

Sierpiński-inspired Model of Concept Analysis



“Sierpiński Pyramid,” Public Domain

As Figure 3 illustrates, concepts are embedded within other concepts and overlapping with others, which suggests that meaning-making is an open-ended process requiring great effort and attention. It also illustrates the recursiveness of the human mind and its need to experiment and extend its vocabulary of thought in ways both critical and creative, for example, through philosophy and literary art.

I would argue that behind every empirically real act of violence there is conceptual violence underpinning it. In one important sense, concepts are ideas in the mind that help a person in grasping the world and their place within it—the more robust and accurate the concept, the more one increases their orientation and understanding. What I term conceptual violence is a mix of ignorance and arrogance that occurs when a person wrongly assumes that they have clearly delimited a concept or exhausted its content while merely grasping a small

part of it. It is the act of reducing the concept pyramid to the 2-D triangle thereby simultaneously reducing the many varied signs, properties, and referents of a concept to a shell of itself, breeding misinformation and misunderstanding and ultimately distorting reality.

When I analyze the concept *woman* in my writing workshop for survivors of sexual violence, I speculate that in a perpetrator's mind there is conceptual violence that precedes the act of sexual violation. For example, when a perpetrator conceptualizes a woman as a sexual object subservient to men and this property encompasses the whole of his understanding, then this impoverished concept begins to pervert perception. In reality, what it means to be a woman is polysemous, dynamic, and dependent on the lived experiences of human beings who use the word and refine it over time. In the workshop, I have clients participate in a kinesthetic activity using plastic triangles that snap together to create all kinds of complex shapes (see Figure 4). I give them ten minutes to create elaborate, complex, and sometimes surprising structures. When we talk about concepts in our minds that are vague and half-formed and concepts that are so empty and impoverished because of prejudice, misogyny, intolerance, or apathy, I place a single flat triangle in front of them. I then ask them to place their newly created three-dimensional triangle structures next to the single flat triangle. I ask them, holding up the single triangle, *are you just a sexual object of desire, are you just a mother, are you just a student, are you just a sister or daughter, are you just a victim?* In reality, each person is many things, snapping on new triangles, taking off old ones, exploring how and where the triangles come from, and innovating new shapes, moment to moment, decision to decision. In the workshop when I pivot to poetry, I tell them to reflect on what they think poetry is and what it is for and whether or not there is only a single triangle in their mind, a partially constructed shape, or a vast and growing structure. I ask them to pay attention to language, to read, write, share, listen, and to snap on as many triangles as they can.

**Figure 4**  
Kinesthetic triangle activity in practice

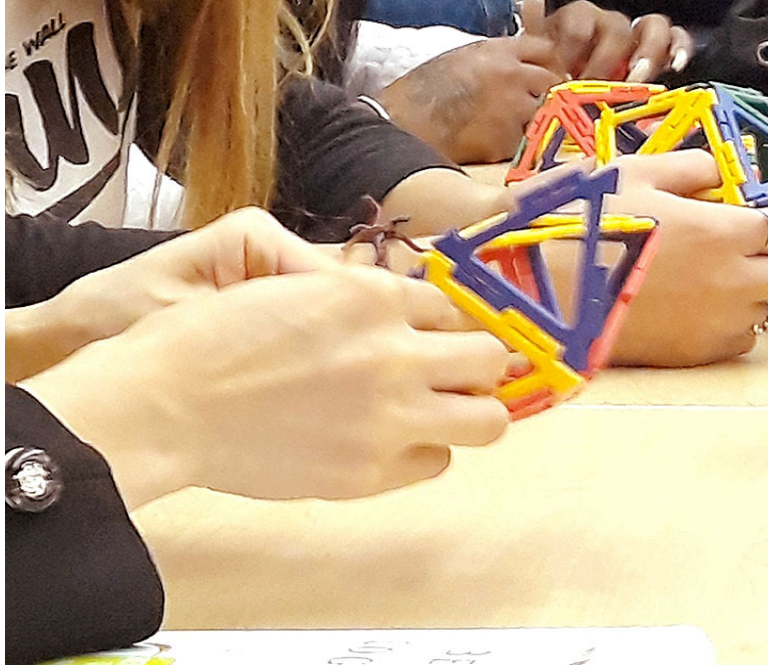


Photo provided by the author

In what follows, I will analyze the Akedah from many points of view and pay close attention to the nuance of its language in order to better understand it, which will prepare the ground for Chapter 4 where I will reinterpret the Akedah *qua* literary art existing at the border between story and poem to expand its meaning and function in relation to the study of pathological mourning.

## 2.3 Interpreting the Akedah

In this section I will read and outline the story of Abraham and Isaac on its own terms as a first step in tracing the trajectory of its many diverse interpretations. It begins with an ambiguous statement about the passing of time. Genesis 22:1 states, “Sometime afterward, God put Abraham to the test.”<sup>104</sup> Laurence H. Kant states:

The Genesis narrator introduces the passage by indicating that a period of indeterminate time had elapsed after the covenant of Abraham and Abimelech in Beer-sheva in Genesis 21. The phrase “sometime afterward,” serves to link Genesis 21 and 22, but neither specifies a specific duration of the interval nor aids the reader in determining the age of either Isaac or Abraham.<sup>105</sup>

So, it is unclear exactly how old Isaac is at the start of the story. At one point Isaac is referred to as a boy and in the story he climbs a mountain, asks a thoughtful question, and carries firewood. This clearly rules out that Isaac was a very young child on the one hand and an adult with full autonomy on the other.<sup>106</sup>

The covenant between Abraham and Abimelech in Genesis 21 foreshadows the covenant between God and Abraham at the end of the Akedah in Genesis 22. For now, let us outline the logic of the covenant as follows: for the purpose of regulating human relationships, an extension of kinship is offered to an individual or group along with the corresponding duties

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<sup>104</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>105</sup> Laurence H. Kant, “Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text: Abraham’s Binding of Isaac and the Horror of Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22): Part 2,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 39, 2 (2003), p. 161.

<sup>106</sup> Though there appears to be endless debate about Isaac’s exact age, Berman makes a compelling point when he writes, “The very absence of descriptive detail [in the Akedah] enables Isaac to stand for all children of whatever age and characteristics, however they get along with their fathers.” Berman, op. cit., p. 60.

and privileges that such an alliance demands.<sup>107</sup> This offer, meant to be inviolable, is ratified by an oath and transmits benefits if obeyed and punishment if broken.<sup>108</sup>

In Genesis 22:1-2, God speaks directly to Abraham and explains the test that is required of him. The text states, “He [God] said to him, ‘Abraham,’ and he answered, ‘Here I am.’ And He said, ‘Take your son, your favored son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will show you.’”<sup>109</sup> It is important to note that this disturbing directive contradicts two covenant-making episodes that God makes with Abraham in Genesis 15:17-21 and 17:1-27 where God explicitly promises to give Abraham and Sarah’s progeny the land between the Nile and Euphrates rivers and that their descendants will be numerous and give birth to many future nations.<sup>110</sup> With the death of Isaac there will be no descendants of Abraham and Sarah since he is their only son together. As was detailed in Chapter 1, it is precisely this moment in the story that can be viewed as an embryonic form of genocide where an individual (Isaac) is destroyed which then directly contributes to the destruction of the group to which the individual belongs—in this case the entire Jewish race. Commentaries that call this directive a mystery, a challenge, or a simple test of faith do not go far enough. This is asking of Abraham to commit a double murder and the most heinous crime possible by contemporary standards. From a human perspective it is, in a word, evil.

But Abraham, without apparent hesitation, obeys. He wakes early the next morning, makes his preparations and immediately sets off for the mountain. The way the text is structured implies without saying explicitly that God had spoken to Abraham the previous night in a

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<sup>107</sup> Scott Hahn, “Covenant, Oath and the Aqedah: Diatheke in Galatians 3:15-18” in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Volume 67, Number 1, January 2005, pp. 90-91.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. pp. 22 and 23-24.

dream. Genesis 22:3 reads, “So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him.” Thus, leaving Sarah in the dark and home behind, the journey begins.

On the third day of the trip Abraham finally sees the mountain off in the distance. Spurred into action by the imposing mountain on the horizon, Abraham tells his servants to stay behind as he makes his ascent with Isaac. At this key moment, Isaac finally speaks up with a poignant question. Here is how the text unfolds which places the reader at the exact halfway point of the story:

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he answered, “Yes, my son.” And he said, “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” And Abraham said, “God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together.<sup>111</sup>

A subtle shift by Abraham in the previous verse from referring to Isaac in the third person as “the boy” to saying directly to Isaac “my son,” heightens the tension by personalizing the straining relationship between parent and child.

At this point in the story, the action picks up speed. Finally arriving at the designated place for the sacrifice of Isaac, in quick succession Abraham “built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son.”<sup>112</sup> As Kant points out, “For the only time in the Bible, the narrator uses the word that gives our passage its name: ‘*aqad*, literally meaning in later Hebrew ‘to lie bent limbs together.’ Thus, ‘*aqad* refers to the ‘binding’ of the forelegs and hindlegs of

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

a sacrificial animal, here Isaac.”<sup>113</sup> The swiftness of Abraham’s actions could imply a confidence and certainty to the decision to kill his son. The reader almost expects the knife to slide across Isaac’s throat with equal haste, but an “angel of the Lord” intervenes at the very last moment. The angel speaks: “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to harm him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.”<sup>114</sup>

Before Abraham can speak, a surrogate animal appears nearby to be sacrificed in Isaac’s stead. A “ram, caught in the thicket by its horns” is killed and burnt to ash in the span of one sentence.<sup>115</sup> Then suddenly, Abraham, who appears to have an inspired thought, names the rocky outcrop on which he stands, “*Adonai-yireh*,” which can be translated as “on the mount of the Lord there is vision.”<sup>116</sup> Ultimately, what Abraham and Isaac see and what the reader sees through their sight is open to interpretation which is perhaps the test the text continues to provide.

At this point with the catastrophe avoided, the angel of the Lord addresses Abraham for a second and final time providing a consoling reward for the ordeal. For the third time in Hebrew scripture, God swears an oath and confirms the covenant whereby Abraham’s descendants will flourish, be blessed, and “seize the gates of their foes” far into the future, and all nations everywhere will be blessed through their flourishing.<sup>117</sup> Abraham has proven not only his faith but his fear of God. Zierler argues that by the end of the Akedah fear has been exalted and love eclipsed.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Kant, “Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text,” op. cit., p. 168.

<sup>114</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., pp. 31-32.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. In Chapter 3, this moment of vision will be explored in light of Freud’s comments about the melancholic’s “keen eye for the truth.” Freud, MM, p. 22.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Zierler, op. cit., p. 21.

In a sparse concluding sentence of the Akedah, Abraham appears to depart the mountain without mention of Isaac. Instead, it only names Abraham and his two servants leaving Moriah for Beer-sheba where Abraham remained for some time. As we will see, some interpretations make much of this omission that seems to suggest a radically ruptured relationship between father and son. With the Akedah story now briefly outlined, we are now ready to examine and evaluate its significant interpretations.

## 2.4 The Atonement Interpretation

There is a special meaning of atonement in theological discourse, namely, “reconciliation or restoration of friendly relations between God and man.”<sup>119</sup> For a person or community to reconcile with God it is required they offer a sacrifice. With the sacrifice and its rituals complete, the end result is a restored relationship with God where the repentant sinner is thought to be drawn closer to God.<sup>120</sup> In the *Torah*, in order for the guilty one to settle their debt and heal the injury they have caused, they must the sacrifice a domesticated animal<sup>121</sup> which in turn provides a “pleasing odor to the Lord.”<sup>122</sup> In the Akedah, in order to make things right with God, Abraham is commanded to sacrifice something much more dear, namely, his favored son Isaac. This is well known. What remains unknown and unclear is the *nature of the wrongdoing*.

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<sup>119</sup> “atonement, n.” OED online. [www.oed.com.libus.csd.mu.edu/view/Entry/12599](http://www.oed.com.libus.csd.mu.edu/view/Entry/12599). See also, *Sacrifice, Cult, and Atonement in Early Judaism and Christianity: Constituents and Critique*, eds. Henrietta L. Wiley and Christian A. Eberhart (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2017), pp. 197-221.

<sup>120</sup> Interestingly, the etymology of the Hebrew word for sacrifice illuminates its core function: “The word ‘*Karbanot*’ is usually translated as ‘sacrifices’ or ‘offerings’ [...]. [It] comes from the root Qof-Resh-Bet, which means ‘to draw near,’ and indicates the primary purpose of offerings: to draw us near to God.” [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/sacrifices-and-offerings-karbanot](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/sacrifices-and-offerings-karbanot).

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., p. 153.

According to the atonement interpretation, the Akedah was commanded because of something that has already happened in the past.<sup>123</sup> This past action was some kind of wrongdoing committed by a human person, in this case, one of the people in the story—Abraham, Isaac or Sarah—who now requires punishment and proof that the wrongdoer can be trusted once again. This interpretation makes the Akedah a kind of purification by punishment for the guilty person. But what does Abraham have to be guilty for? One possibility is the role he played in abandoning Hagar and his first-born son, Ishmael. Genesis 21:9-21 provides the details to this sordid affair of doubt, jealousy, and hard-heartedness.<sup>124</sup> In their extreme old age, Abraham and Sarah have all but given up hope of ever having a child of their own despite God's promises to the contrary in Genesis 15 and 17—Sarah appears to be barren and fated to die childless. In a moment of doubt and despair at the thought of dying without any progeny to carry forward the bloodline and cultural heritage of the patriarch, Sarah happens upon a partial solution. She suggests that Abraham copulate and conceive a child with Hagar, Abraham's concubine and Sarah's maid. He agrees and the relationship produces a son they name Ishmael.<sup>125</sup>

After a time, Sarah herself is granted a child through God's miraculous intervention. A few years on with Isaac now weaned, she notices Ishmael playing and suddenly demands that Abraham banish the mother of his child and their only son together to almost certain death in the harsh Judean wilderness.<sup>126</sup> She states her motive clearly: "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."<sup>127</sup> As it states in Genesis 22:11, "The matter distressed Abraham, for it concerned a son of his."<sup>128</sup> Yet,

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<sup>123</sup> Berman, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>124</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

despite his legitimate reservations, he goes along with this wrongful action and sends them away. As David Polish surmises, “Abraham cannot get Ishmael out of his mind. He is answering with Isaac because of Ishmael.”<sup>129</sup> Thus, it can be inferred that the binding of Isaac is the punishment for the expulsion of Ishmael.

In this light, one wonders if the whole episode is a parable about fathers and sons (God to Abraham, Abraham to Isaac) on how to teach a child to behave properly. This might be analogous to when a rebellious, thoughtless adolescent is pressured into smoking a cigarette, gets caught, and then is forced to smoke a pack of cigarettes in front of his father. This *second smoking*, as it were, would likely cause the teen to feel sick from the nicotine settling into their blood stream and the harshness of the smoke in their lungs proving the point that the *first smoking* was wrong. With Abraham the stakes are much higher. He was wrong in performing the *first sacrifice* of his son Ishmael so he is being forced to perform a *second sacrifice* of his other son Isaac in front of the divine Father. This surely would be an unbearable exercise to have to endure. Abraham’s grief would no doubt make him sick, but according to this line of thought, will teach him an invaluable lesson and guide him back to the righteous path.

Yet according to the atonement theory, it is not only Abraham who is guilty and needs to atone for his sins, but it is Isaac as well. Polish states that Isaac is “silent [during the ascent up the mountain in the Akedah] because he was silent when his brother had been taken away [...]. He was old enough to realize that because of him, his brother was being disinherited and driven forth.”<sup>130</sup> Isaac stood by in silence and did not speak up *for* his brother or speak out *against* his father and mother. One thinks of the bystander effect and the sociological phenomenon of the diffusion of responsibility. This theory states that oftentimes individuals in

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<sup>129</sup> David Polish, “Akeda Yitzhak—The Binding of Isaac,” *Judaism*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1957): 17-21.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

a group setting will be more reluctant to act and intervene to help a person in need because they assume that someone else in the group will do it.<sup>131</sup> This is complicated in Isaac's case since he is a youth surrounded by adults he must hope will do the right thing and who he must obey. Polish is perhaps overly harsh on Isaac in his condemnation of Isaac's passivity.<sup>132</sup> Surely the blame lies with the father and not with the boy who is not yet equipped with the proper rational and emotional intelligence nor with the autonomy to deal with such an injustice. To view the Akedah as a just punishment *for Isaac* seems wrong in this context because of Isaac's reduced agency and limited understanding of his parent's actions.

Given this reading of the Akedah, the atonement interpretation might plausibly view Genesis 21:12 as setting up the sinful father and son in order to evaluate their understanding of God's laws and expectations. It states: "But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed over the boy [Ishmael] or your slave [Hagar]; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you.'"<sup>133</sup> God is testing Abraham and communicating in an ironic mode. In other words, God is saying one thing (do not distress, do what Sarah says, harm the child) but meaning the opposite (be distressed, disobey Sarah, protect the child) to see if Abraham can think for himself and push back against God's directive, which

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<sup>131</sup> See, for example, "Bystander Effect," *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology* (New York: Gale Group, 2001), which states, "The term bystander effect, or bystander apathy, was first employed by psychologists in the early 1960s. The 1964 murder of New Yorker Kitty Genovese provides an illustration of this phenomenon. Genovese, who was being savagely attacked outside her apartment building, screamed for help for over 30 minutes. Although 40 neighbors heard Genovese's desperate cries, no one came to her aid or even called the police. Researchers have explained several components of the bystander effect. First, witnesses must perceive the situation as an emergency. When others are present, not taking action or behaving as if nothing were wrong, all observers tend to view the situation as a nonemergency. Psychologists describe this as *pluralistic ignorance*, in which the behavior of the group causes each individual to be lulled into inaction. In the case of Genovese's murder, her neighbors were not hearing her cries for help as a group. Each person, isolated in his or her own apartment, heard the disturbance and had no way of knowing the reactions of others who were hearing Genovese's screams. However, each person could believe that someone else was taking action, and therefore the responsibility for response fell to that other person. Psychologists call this reaction *diffusion of responsibility*." pp. 47-48.

<sup>132</sup> This will be further addressed in section 2.9 of this chapter.

<sup>133</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit. p. 29.

is a precursor to the Akedah itself. But in this reading of the text, it would be *disobedience* that is required to pass the test and *not* obedience—Abraham should disobey God, Isaac should disobey Abraham.<sup>134</sup> Ultimately, this is a test of maturity and acuity. If they pass the test, then they can atone for their previous immoral behavior.

## 2.5 The Martyrdom Interpretation

In one sense of the term, a martyr is a “person who undergoes death or great suffering for a faith, belief, or cause, or [...] through devotion to some object.”<sup>135</sup> Rather than renounce their faith or disobey a divine command to avoid brutal, lethal treatment, religious martyrs *embrace* persecution and torture in order to bear public witness to the strength and steadfastness of their belief and trust in God. For the martyr, it is better to die rather than betray God, suffer rather than blaspheme, and publicly proclaim one’s faith rather than privately cower out of self-preservation and fear. Martyrs are willing to take risks to stand by their persecuted view in the face of a hostile world. This *standing-by-one’s-belief* implies integrity and accountability because the believer’s conviction is consistent and steadfast at all times and does not shift or pander in the face of resistance thereby making the martyr ready for God’s ultimate judgment whenever it arrives.

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<sup>134</sup> Cf. Omri Boehm, “Politics and the Binding of Isaac,” The Stone (blog), *The New York Times*, January 14, 2014. <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/14/the-politics-of-the-binding-of-isaac/>. Boehm has also argued that in the Akedah disobedience is what is expected of Abraham and required to pass the trial. Boehm then applies this theological reading to the arena of human politics by framing it as a critical lesson on when to question and disobey authority, especially governmental and State authority, when it conflicts with our convictions, values, and morality.

<sup>135</sup> “martyr, n.” OED online. [www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/114474](http://www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/114474).

As Berman states, religious martyrdom is “closely bound with belief in an afterlife or in bodily resurrection.”<sup>136</sup> In other words, the martyr is able to face death so confidently because she is certain that earthly annihilation is only a temporary suspension of personal existence. For the martyr, God can and will conquer human death and reward the faithful with eternal life. A contemporary example of this type of attitude towards suffering and death for God is illustrated by certain Muslim militias in Gaza and the West Bank. In the face of persecution from neighboring Israelis who possess dominant military power, death to resisters is all but inevitable. But from the viewpoint of the Muslim martyr, death is *victory* as it illustrates a person’s true faith to Allah and thereby guarantees them a reward in heaven, namely eternal life. The initial bereavement of the community crescendos into a celebratory parade through the streets with the martyr’s body held high and colorful posters of the martyr placed ubiquitously throughout the town commemorating the heroic act.<sup>137</sup>

In this light, the Akedah is a story about what must be suffered for God and what rewards may come from this suffering. Abraham must give up Isaac, and Isaac must let go of his life. Even if it is not clear as to *why* this killing and dying must be enacted, the martyrdom interpretation asserts that what God gives he can take away, and what he takes away he can restore. In some rabbinical commentaries that see martyrdom as essential to the Akedah, Isaac most certainly dies. The only questions hovering over the text are exactly how and when Isaac dies. On one interpretation, Isaac dies as a direct result of Abraham’s cutting his throat with a sharpened knife.<sup>138</sup> Because the text states that Isaac had been placed upon the woodpile, this reading argues that Abraham would have already bled the boy and lit the fire before positioning

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<sup>136</sup> Berman, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>137</sup> See, for example, the documentary film *Death in Gaza*, directed by James Miller and written by Saira Shah (New York: HBO Films, 2004).

<sup>138</sup> Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah*, trans. Judah Goldin (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), pp. 123-130. See also Berman, op. cit. p. 89.

the body for immolation due to the well-established customs surrounding the burnt sacrifice of animals. A variation on this theme has Isaac dying of fright at the sight of Abraham's knife before the ritual killing even begins. Still another interpretation claims that he was already burned to death by the fire before the angel stayed Abraham's hand. In all three of these midrashim, Isaac's soul ascends to heaven to be healed, then returns to earth in victorious resurrection, his body rising from the ashes.<sup>139</sup>

Isaac, who could have protested and resisted his father's and God's commands, faithfully concedes to his own death as a resolute martyr. For this act of faithful obedience, not only is his life restored, but his future progeny and descendants are blessed also. So, what is being tested in the Akedah is not only Abraham's *loyalty* to God, but also Isaac's resolute belief in God's *power*, that is, the power to make death a meaningful pathway to everlasting life, the power to defeat death itself.

Both of these motifs can be illustrated through a poem about the Akedah by Rabbi Ephraim ben Jacob of Bonn, which is the centerpiece of Spiegel's textual analysis.<sup>140</sup> In a gripping re-reading of the Akedah inspired by lore collected in the Talmud, Rabbi Ephraim writes that Abraham was *so* loyal and took his duty to God *so* seriously that he kills Isaac on the alter. Then, when Isaac is miraculously resurrected by God, Abraham attempts to murder his son *again*, a second time, since the first death was reversed and his duty not fulfilled. Luckily for Isaac, he is swept away to safety to the garden of Eden by a flood of angels' tears who cry out for mercy for the boy.<sup>141</sup> This expanded and novel version of the Akedah identifies and powerfully illustrates Abraham's obedience and Isaac's trust in God's power.

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<sup>139</sup>Spiegel, *Ibid.*, p. 60-72. See also Berman, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-104.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129-131.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

Another approach to suffering and death is present in Genesis with the story of Noah and the flood.<sup>142</sup> Out of a terrible genocidal cleansing of the earth, a new pact with humanity is presented to Noah and his kin. Though Noah does not have to die himself, he surely experiences grief at the unimaginable loss of life around him. Both Levinas and Critchley make the case that death only enters the world through our concern with the death of others.<sup>143</sup> This concern and the grief that follows become a defining experience of pain at our own impotence and finitude. In this context, this realization becomes the catalyst to better understanding why the children of God need their father's protection and power. Out of death (what God takes away) something new and improved emerges, namely, a new covenant with God that provides protection for the faithful who now fully grasp God's omnipotence and their own dependence.

Berman argues that the martyrdom interpretation of the Akedah gains appeal when real world persecution flourishes.<sup>144</sup> In this context, Berman cites Jacob Neusner's theory that the Holocaust must be read through the lens of the Akedah as the way to understand why God allowed such evil to befall his chosen people. According to Neusner, just as Abraham had to give up his son to generate the future bloodline of Israel, so did many Jewish sons and daughters need to be martyred in the Shoah to generate the state of Israel.<sup>145</sup>

There are many reasons to find this interpretation of the Shoah objectionable and offensive. It seems to presuppose that the proper end justifies *any means* whatsoever, including the vilest crime imaginable—the genocide of men, woman, and innocent children. And it is clearly not a fair comparison to put the Shoah beside the Akedah. In the Akedah, God or a

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<sup>142</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., pp. 10-14.

<sup>143</sup> Levinas, RTB, p. 123. Critchley, *How to Stop Living and Start Worrying*, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>144</sup> Berman, op. cit., p. 86.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. Neusner writes, "In this rebirth of the Jewish state we see [...] the resurrection of Israel, the ever-dying people, out of the gas chambers of Europe. The binding of Isaac today stands for the renewal of Israel in its life as a state and in its life, throughout the world, as a people. [...] No wonder then, that we find in the details of the binding of Isaac, as our sages read it, an account of what has happened to us and what is happening to us, in the here and now," quoted in Berman, pp. 86-87.

messenger of God clearly communicates through audible and visual cues directly to Abraham before, during, and after the ordeal. Many survivors of the Shoah testified to the utter absence of God's presence during their suffering.<sup>146</sup> And the one near-death experience of a boy in Genesis 22 does not compare to the vast number of children who were killed by Hitler and the Nazi's. As I argued above, the Akedah can be interpreted as an embryonic form of genocide; the Nazi destruction of the Jews is a fully realized example of genocide in all its horror. To invoke Ivan Karamazov's response to the idea that God's plan for higher harmony and heavenly acceptance requires the suffering and death of innocent children: we should want nothing to do with this harmony, we should return our heavenly ticket, we should rebel against God.<sup>147</sup>

## 2.6 The Deglorification Interpretation

If the adjective *glorious* describes a praiseworthy object that commands our admiration, then it is no wonder that its substantive form is used in the phrase "the glory of God" since God is commonly considered to be the supreme being and the "highest moral aim of intelligent creatures."<sup>148</sup> Conversely, the neologism *deglorify* indicates when something or someone is judged as having little value or importance. Thus, the deglorification interpretation views the Akedah in an entirely negative light and by extension expresses a critical stance toward Judaism as a whole. On one reading of Hegel, for example, Abraham is seen as paradigmatically Jewish

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<sup>146</sup> See, for example, Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), Kindle, pp. 173-174. See also, Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (London: Yale University Press, 1991). Cf. Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah, An Oral History of the Holocaust: The Complete Text of the Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

<sup>147</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brother Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), pp. 244-245.

<sup>148</sup> "glory, n." OED online. [www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/79122](http://www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/79122).

and the Jewish religion is judged to be an inferior form of religion to be surpassed in history by a more perfect form, namely, Christianity. Thus, Judaism should be allowed to die since it has outlived its historical relevance and usefulness. Lawrence Stepelevich, quoting Hegel from an early essay, comments:

Here the Jew is seen not only as sundered from himself, but from the world as well. Abraham is taken as the paradigm Jew, whose ‘spirit is the unity, the soul, regulating the entire fate of his posterity.’ [...] Abraham ‘was a stranger to the soil and men alike’ [...]. The otherness of both God and nature, which is the essence of Judaism, forever frustrates that absolute reconciliation of spirit and nature which is the final object of Hegelianism.<sup>149</sup>

Part of what makes Abraham strange and therefore alienated from his community and family is his willingness to follow a God who would command an act forbidden by the shared norms and collective consciousness of society, tribe, and kin. The act of killing one’s own son for no apparent reason other than the arbitrary will of God puts God’s otherworldliness into stark relief. This violates human reason and contradicts God’s own laws previously set forth to establish the community of Jews on earth.

In this sense, the Akedah is taken at face value as a barbaric act of brute force against an innocent child that proves to be too heteronomous to human reason and freedom to be accepted. Metaethical theory that explains *how* a normative principle or law of right action is acquired distinguishes between autonomous and heteronomous sources. Judaism is an exemplary case of the latter since the source of that law (*nomos*) comes from some place other (*hetero*) than a human one, namely, God. In the case of Abraham, the source of the command to kill Isaac is an otherworldly God who is acting *so inhumanely* and counter intuitively to reason that it challenges the idea that humans are made in the image and likeness of God and

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<sup>149</sup> Lawrence S. Stepelevich, “Hegel and Judaism,” *Judaism*, vol 24., issue 2 (Spring 1975): p. 217.

can actively participate in creation. On this interpretation, Abraham is the passive follower of a command he cannot understand and should not accept. The traits that make him human are bound and banished even as he binds his son for slaughter. In this way, to take God's side in this instance is to take an opposing viewpoint to the human world of rules and values that communities are built on—family, solidarity, rational dialogue, and empathy for one's own.

It is not clear to this reader what exactly Hegel's "absolute reconciliation of spirit and nature" would look like in practice, but in a formal sense it would need to involve sublation, namely, the synthesis of opposites into a kind of harmony that somehow replaces, preserves, and elevates the interlacing elements.<sup>150</sup> Bracketing out Hegel's own conception of art and its subsumption by philosophy, one possible concrete example of sublation is music, specifically the playing of a symphony. Not only are opposing notes played by opposing instruments brought together into an ordered harmony of sound, but more deeply still the material, sensuous side of music itself is an essential part of the experience of transcendence for the musicians and their audience of rapt listeners. George Steiner elaborates this peculiar phenomenon:

[M]usic is supremely meaningful but its meanings remain indefinable and refuse either paraphrase or translation. Like the tautological "I am" out of the Burning Bush, it is what it is. [...] For innumerable men and women in every historical epoch and community musical experience is, in ways which they cannot diagnose or verbalize, "transcendent." Music's otherwise inexpressible powers of signification appear to be the natural simulacrum of religious experience. Of experience "beyond experience."<sup>151</sup>

The "experience beyond experience," a kind of elevation, comes to be *through* the "sensuous" experience of music. Something higher is felt in the listening—an unmistakable plenitude. Psychologists call this higher feeling *oceanic*, and for Steiner and others this equates to

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<sup>150</sup> Julie Maybee, "Hegel's Dialectics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/hegel-dialectics/>.

<sup>151</sup> George Steiner, "Begging the Question," *My Unwritten Books* (New York: New Directions Books, 2008), pp. 199-200.

something like “religious assent and elevation.”<sup>152</sup> In this sense, “the infinite [...] finds expression in the finite world.”<sup>153</sup> And perhaps the unlimited is present in the awareness of the limit. On one interpretation of Hegel, truth is not found in a higher reality that disavows the objects, customs, and history of this world, but is discovered through the continual discernment of these things over time. Truth in its totality progressively reveals itself to human minds in succeeding historical periods. The ultimate goal of history is the idea of freedom, which involves the full realization of human autonomy, rationality, and self-consciousness.<sup>154</sup> For the deglorification interpretation, the Jewish perspective as exemplified in the Akedah story is not a story of exemplary faith, but a deluded act of child abuse, the history of an error.

If human freedom and rational autonomy are the culminating chapters of human history for Hegel, then the subservient, uncritical obedience of Abraham in the Akedah is an inferior prologue destined to be surpassed. Thus, an absolute *dependence* on God is anathema to an approach like Hegel’s. Anthony Thiselton states:

Hegel believed that a Christian doctrine of the Trinity entirely cohered with his philosophy of history, logic, and reason. The ‘thesis’ of creation and the religion of Judaism (God the Father) became ‘negated’ in the ‘antithesis’ of the incarnation and the cross (God the Son). The cross, in a dialectal sense, was the ‘death’ of God. Resurrection and Pentecost, however, now (historically and logically) began the New Age of freedom (the Spirit of God). The particularism of Judaism becomes universalized.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 200. See, “oceanic feeling,” American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology. <https://dictionary.apa.org/oceanic-state>.

<sup>153</sup> Marvin Perry, *An Intellectual History of Modern Europe* (Boston and Toronto: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), p. 191.

<sup>154</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. B. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1956).

<sup>155</sup> Anthony Thiselton, “Hegel” *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002). pp. 1256-127.

The opposite of free, Hegel emphasizes how Judaism is defined by its “servitude,” and claims that the “worst religions” are the ones “in which servitude...is strongest.”<sup>156</sup> For the Jew, there is an “impassable gulf” between humanity and God which is exemplified in Abraham and epitomized in the Akedah.<sup>157</sup> Hegel states, “The whole world Abraham regarded as simply his opposite; if he did not take it to be a nullity, he looked on it as sustained by the God who was *alien* to it.”<sup>158</sup> Hegel goes on to argue that love of kin is a central aspect of humanity but this is wholly lacking in the Akedah. Hegel states:

Love alone was beyond [Abraham’s] power; even the one love he had, his love for his son, even his hope of posterity...could depress him, trouble his all-exclusive heart and disquiet it to such an extent that even this love he once wished to destroy; and his heart was quieted only through the certainty of the feeling that this love was not so strong as to render him unable to slay his beloved son with his own hand.<sup>159</sup>

It is interesting to note here Hegel’s claim that Abraham was neither depressed nor troubled in any way during the Akedah. In the interpretation of the Akedah that will be explicated in Chapter 3 and 4, which puts any critique of religion aside, the experience of pathological mourning is *illuminated* by Abraham’s actions in the Akedah.

For Hegel, Christ is the embodiment of reconciliation, which is missing in the “prison of a Jewish soul,” in their incomplete consciousness.<sup>160</sup> Abraham’s consciousness is, according to Althusser, “the other of this absolute other [God], which crushes it beneath the weight of its alien power. Thus, man’s relationship to God, experienced as the greatest possible separation [...] in fact turns out to be a relationship of affinity between man’s nothingness and God’s.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Hegel, *Hegel: Theologian of the Spirit*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), Kindle, locations 770 and 1080.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, location 770.

<sup>158</sup> Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox and Richard Kroner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 187. Italics mine.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Hegel, *Hegel: Theologian of the Spirit*, op. cit., locations 1077 and 1084.

<sup>161</sup> Louis Althusser, *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), pp. 31-32.

God's nothingness is revealed in the fact that his commands are devoid of all sense, seem to come from nowhere, and lead to nothing that results in human flourishing. Man's nothingness is expressed in his blind obedience where he must turn off his mind, his feelings, and his loyalties leaving nothing but an empty faith devoid of anything rational. What is left for the Jewish man exemplified by Abraham is an "empty legalism," a following of God's law without understanding and without question despite its leading to one's own ruin.<sup>162</sup> For Hegel, the Akedah must be abandoned for another story, the gloried passion of the Christ. Althusser writes:

Christ's mission is precisely to reconcile man with the Law [of God], to infuse the Law with a living content: Christ comes to *fulfil* the Law, he is himself the Law fulfilled; he reconciles God with his people, and the people with its destiny, by means of Love. [...] Love is the end result of a process, the overcoming of dismemberment. [...] Love is *Aufhebung*, a supersession which embraces contraries and expresses their truth.<sup>163</sup>

As seen in the particular example of Hegel, the deglorification interpretation dramatizes the need for spiritual rebirth in Christ and attempts to argue for the primitive morality of the people in the *Old Testament*. A dramatic example that illustrates the radical difference between old and new approaches to morality occurs in Matthew 5:21-22 where Jesus explicitly references Mosaic law as something to be surpassed and improved.<sup>164</sup> Despite the tension here between respect for the Mosaic tradition and the need to move beyond it, the deglorification interpretation attempts to resolve the ambivalence by showing how the primary criteria of Christian morality are violated in the Akedah, namely, love, forgiveness, and non-violence. From a Hegelian point of view, the rationality embodied in the ethical life of the community is universal insofar as it comprises the laws and customs rationally defended, enshrined, and

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Christ states in Matthew 5:21-22, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment." *Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), p. 822.

applied in a particular society. Insofar as Abraham violates the ethical life of the community, he must be seen as a murderer that is not worthy of praise or emulation.<sup>165</sup>

## 2.7 The Test of Obedience Interpretation

In chemistry, a test refers to the process by which a substance is examined in a controlled environment in order to determine that substance's identity.<sup>166</sup> Similarly in the field of mechanics, a test is that by which the physical properties of metals and machines are evaluated in order "to determine their ability to satisfy particular requirements."<sup>167</sup> In the context of metallurgy, a test-vessel is a pot-like object in which metals are worked to be either separated, smelted or refined.<sup>168</sup> Due to the nature of metals, this kind of work requires the application of great amounts of heat to the metals, which means the test-vessel, too, must be capable of withstanding high temperatures for an extended amount of time *without being destroyed in the process*. Generalizing from these technical fields, a test can be understood as any strenuous means "by which the existence, quality or genuineness of anything is determined."<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> It would be an interesting experiment to approach Derrida's own reading of Abraham and Isaac via his critique of Kierkegaard in *The Gift of Death* as a benign form of deglorification, which might be better termed a *deconstruction* of glorification. Derrida's reading challenges the status of Abraham as a unique or exemplary "knight of faith" who, in the secrecy and incomprehensibility of his "absolute decision" on Mount Moriah, experiences a rare relation to God qua "wholly other." He writes, "Translated into this extraordinary story [of the Akedah], the truth is shown to possess the very structure of the everyday...[and] speaks of the responsibility required at every moment for every man and every woman." And later, he writes, "At the instant of every decision and through the relation to every other (*one*) as every (*bit*) *other*, every one else asks us at every moment to behave like knights of faith." Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 78-79.

<sup>166</sup> "test, n." OED online. [www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/199677](http://www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/199677).

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

A near synonym to test, but with even more overt connotations of difficulty and stress, is the concept of a *crucible*, which denotes any type of “severe test” and can also mean “a vessel made to endure great heat, used for fusing metals.”<sup>170</sup> The word crucible is derived from the Latin words *crux* and *crucis*,<sup>171</sup> which denote *cross* and for a Christian carries with it the association of torture and death by crucifixion.

In metallurgy as in life, the testing involved in the crucible operates by separation, that is, the literal or metaphorical *fire* of the crucible that acts to divide the impurities from the precious metals to see how much purity and strength exist in the moment of crisis or whether it is ultimately worthless. An example of this in literature occurs in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.<sup>172</sup> The more experienced and skeptical brother, Ivan, attempts to test Alyosha, his younger, devout sibling who desires to become a Christian monk. Ivan’s crucible centers on a provocative articulation of the problem of evil that serves as a direct challenge to the Christian theist of which Alyosha is representative. I would argue that Ivan’s imposed crucible is enacted to burn away the naïve, uncritical ideas Alyosha has about the goodness of God and His creation. This is achieved by discussing several cases of child abuse, which for Ivan is the paradigm example of evil in the world.<sup>173</sup> If Alyosha’s faith and theological prowess can withstand the pressure of Ivan’s questions and atheological arguments, then Alyosha will be deemed worthy to keep his faith. If there are absences or gaps in Alyosha’s faith and understanding, then these will be made transparent by Ivan’s test and his worldview will end up shattered, which is not unlike the interlocutors in many of Plato’s dialogues who are put to shame by the Socratic *elenchus*.<sup>174</sup> For example, Euthyphro, a self-proclaimed expert in

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<sup>170</sup> “crucible, n.” OED online. [www-oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/45130](http://www-oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/45130).

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Dostoevsky, op. cit., pp. 236-264.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> The elenchus, or cross-examination, that puts a person to the test regarding their knowledge, is an essential part of the Socratic method that includes posing a serious guiding question, having a

religion, cannot answer Socrates's questions concerning piety without saying something contradictory or vacuous.<sup>175</sup> In contrast to Plato's version of the encounter where Euthyphro breaks off the dialogue and continues on his course to prosecute his father unchanged by the refutation, Diogenes Laertius reports an altogether different outcome.<sup>176</sup> He states:

[Socrates] showed equal ability in both directions, in persuading and dissuading men; thus, after conversing with Theaetetus about knowledge, he sent him away, as Plato says, fired with a divine impulse; but when Euthyphro had indicted his father for manslaughter, Socrates, after some conversation with him upon piety, diverted him from his purpose.<sup>177</sup>

In this account, Euthyphro comes to recognize his own ignorance, which is a kind of negative wisdom. Ivan, like Socrates, suspects his brother-cum-interlocuter to hold uncritical beliefs that do not make any sense, should be tested against experience, and likely refuted. Thus, these impure and imperfect beliefs should not influence Alyosha's actions, namely, devoting himself to Christianity and training to become a monk.

But what would it mean to be tested by God Himself? What would God's crucible look like and who could withstand it? The test of obedience interpretation finds the answers to these questions in the Akedah. As was discussed earlier in the chapter, the Akedah is characterized by sparsity and suggestiveness. This minimalistic poetry-like form is a perfect marriage for the content of God's crucible to Abraham since it can only hint at the immediate shock of an experience that itself seems beyond language and logic to articulate or justify. Figure 5

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dialogue with an interlocuter to critically examine their views, exposing flaws in their answers, and eventually refuting their views as unsatisfactory. For Socrates, the interlocuter is ignorant and by the end of the dialogue becomes aware of their ignorance. See W.K.C. Guthrie, *Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 99.

<sup>175</sup> Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 9-30.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

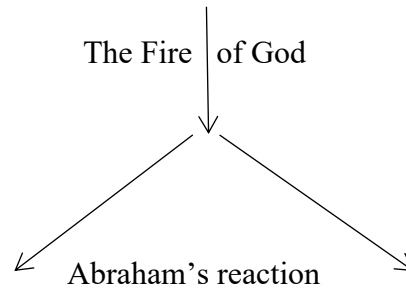
<sup>177</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ed. Ed Hicks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), Chapter 5, section 29. [www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu).

summarizes what is at stake in the crucible put to Abraham and traces the trajectory of his decision.

God's appearance to Abraham in the night acts as the crucible's first flames that begins to work on Abraham to test who he is, what he values, and where his loyalty lies. The command to kill Isaac without explanation is the white-hot center of God's flame. The effect of Abraham's exposure to the extreme heat of this command is his silent obedience as if his voice had become blackened and brittle. Abraham likely internalizes his fears, doubts, and anguish at having to kill his son and blocks the almost endless negative consequences that will follow from this act of familial and tribal betrayal. Because this act is not something that he wants to do nor does it benefit him, his family, or his tribe in any way, it is clear that his motive for acting cannot be inclination or self-interest but total devotion to God. And because there is no way to make sense of God's command or to understand His plan in advance of the outcome, what is left for Abraham is blind faith and a total submission to God. Had Abraham protested God's command citing his moral duty as a father or tribal leader, then the precious metals of faith and obedience to God would have been lost to the fire leaving the less valuable ore of human morality to settle in the test-vessel. The outcome of the Akedah is the extraction of unconditional faith—pure gold—as Abraham passes the test of obedience.

**Figure 5**  
The Crucible

God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac without explanation



RESISTANCE	ACCEPTANCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• impure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pure</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• questions God</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• duty of blind obedience to God only</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• human understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unconditional faith</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• independence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dependence on God</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• attachment to familial and tribal bonds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• detachment from familial and tribal bonds</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• love confirmed, God's wrath likely</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fear confirmed, God's reward certain</li> </ul>

## 2.8 The Disaster Interpretation

In one version of the trolley problem, a runaway train barrels down the tracks toward five unsuspecting and wholly innocent people, workers doing some routine maintenance on the railroad line. Due to the geography of their location, they are incapable of getting out of the way of the oncoming train and stand doomed to meet a gruesome end. Nearby is an onlooker who quickly realizes they are within arm's reach of a lever that will reroute the train onto the sidetrack where only one person is working. This single worker is also incapable of avoiding the train and if it were to head his way it would result in their certain death. What should the

onlooker do? Decide to do nothing and allow the train to continue on its path and witness the death of five people when it was within their power to pull a lever and save them? Or resolutely decide to pull the lever to change the train's course and directly kill the one person on the sidetrack?<sup>178</sup>

A utilitarian-minded person might fall back on the principle of utility and the seventh criterion of the hedonic calculus, namely *extent*, which taken together recommends that a person ought to commit to those actions that maximize the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number of people.<sup>179</sup> Five is clearly greater than one, they might surmise, and quickly pull the lever. They save five by sacrificing one and thereby earn a high score for the extent criterion of the calculus, which specifically assesses the number of people, other than the agent, who benefit from the act. One can imagine all the children and grandchildren who would benefit from the five lives saved, and the generations of children after that. The positive consequences flow indefinitely into the future. Still, it was not easy, but the right thing is often the hardest thing to do.<sup>180</sup> In terms of the calculus' criterion of *purity*, which measures the pain that accompanies the act, the decision to let one person die would still be incredibly painful despite the positive outcome.<sup>181</sup>

The disaster interpretation of the Akedah reads a lot into its opening words, "Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test."<sup>182</sup> This raises the question: some time after *what*? The

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<sup>178</sup> Philippa Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect," *Oxford Review*, 5: 5–15. 1967. Cf. Thomas Cathcart, *The Trolley Problem* (New York: Workman Publishing Co., 2013).

<sup>179</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (White Dog Publishing, 2010), pp. 17–18. See also, John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), p. 7.

<sup>180</sup> Immanuel Kant argues that an action only has moral worth if it is done from duty and not sullied by personal inclination as the primary motive. In this Kantian vein, a good indicator that a person is performing a moral action for the right reason, namely, out duty arrived at via the categorical imperative, is that they actually dislike doing it or have no personal inclination whatsoever. Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, op. cit., pp. 1–7.

<sup>181</sup> Bentham, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>182</sup> Tanakh, op. cit., p. 30.

*what* is not directly addressed but left ambiguous. Is it possible that some “extraordinary event somehow [was] deleted from the Bible”?<sup>183</sup> The disaster interpretation argues that some metaphorical runaway train was heading toward Abraham and his people, possibly in the form of a famine, a disease, or an aggressive threat of invasion. This pending catastrophe prompted Abraham to pull the lever in order to reroute the train and save many lives. In this analogy, pulling the lever means killing Isaac, which secures God’s favor and harnesses His power to save them from the malicious threat. As Berman notes, “Abraham faced an agonizing crisis. Perhaps many human lives were at stake. In this context, offering one life to save many lives is an agonizing thought but not an impossible one.”<sup>184</sup>

Berman also suggests that Judges 3:31<sup>185</sup> offers a somewhat similar scenario and rationale that supports the disaster interpretation where “human sacrifice is the response to an extraordinary danger.”<sup>186</sup> In this biblical episode, Jephtha is asked to lead his fellow Gileadites in a war against an attacking enemy, the Ammonites. Jephtha, in an attempt to gain God’s support for his cause, does not pray or offer an animal sacrifice. Instead, he makes the following vow to God: “if you deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return from the Ammonites shall be the Lord’s and shall be offered by me as a burnt sacrifice.”<sup>187</sup> Jephtha does in fact return victorious from the battlefield only to find that it is his only child, his daughter, who first comes through the door to greet him—*she must be killed*. Her death, in similar fashion as Isaac’s, was essential in avoiding disaster and guaranteeing peace for the Gileadites. To not sacrifice his daughter risks provoking God’s wrath and undermining the victory.

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<sup>183</sup> Berman, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>185</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., pp. 397-399.

<sup>186</sup> Berman, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>187</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., p. 399.

There is another provocative example found in ancient Greek mythology that exemplifies the disaster interpretation, specifically the story of the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father Agamemnon, king of Mycenae. In the context of the Trojan war, he believes that appeasing the goddess Artemis with a human sacrifice will bring favorable winds for his fleet of ships and thereby serve as a catalyst to victory over the Trojans. Of his four children, Agamemnon chooses his daughter Iphigenia to die by his hand.<sup>188</sup> The moments leading up to her death are described in Anne Carson's translation of Aeschylus' play, *Agamemnon*. It reads in part:

Sacrificer of his own daughter he became. [...] Her prayers and cries of *Father!* her young life they reckoned at zero, those warloving captains. Her father said a prayer and bid them seize her high above the altar like a goat with her face to the ground and her robes pouring around her. [...] He fixed a bridle [to her]. Her robe fell to the ground. She cast a glance at each of her killers, like a figure in a painting speaking with her eyes [...].<sup>189</sup>

Given Agamemnon's questionable character and motive, Carson's translation captures the tone of the androcentric scene dominated by callousness and cruelty. It is interesting to compare one particular line translated by Carson with two other well-known translations to see the differences regarding Iphigenia's response to her unjust death sentence. Robert Fagles writes, "her glance like arrows showering wounding every murderer through with pity clear as a picture [...]."<sup>190</sup> In contrast, Herbert Weir Smyth writes, "she smote each of her sacrificers with a glance from her eyes beseeching pity [...]."<sup>191</sup>

Compared to Carson's translation, both Fagles and Smyth stress the *weaponizing* of her eyes that she uses to *retaliate* in the only way she can in that moment. *Arrows* and *smiting* are

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<sup>188</sup> Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth* (New York: Pearson, 2009), pp. 516-517.

<sup>189</sup> Anne Carson, *An Oresteia* (New York: Faber and Faber, inc., 2009), pp. 17-18.

<sup>190</sup> Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Classics, 1984), p. 110.

<sup>191</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* in *Aeschylus Volume II*, trans. Herbert Weir Smyth (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1960), p. 23.

terms of war and Iphigenia is being depicted as a soldier abandoning her post. Carson's translation goes in a different direction completely. She arrives at an analogy for Iphigenia's eyes that communicate how trapped she feels and how her killers have taken away her agency and her future. To be "like a figure in a painting" suggests that she cannot move and will never move again. And who could have possibly painted this artwork? If it is her father, Agamemnon, then it will be a picture painted through the lens of his projections and delusions. The figure in the painting is silent. The secret hidden in the silence is that there once was an irreplaceable voice once, a woman's voice, that was bridled, butchered, and buried. In a dark variation on the treatment of Helen who was prized as an object of desire, Iphigenia is seen as an object of utility to be discarded.

In the Akedah, Sarah was silenced and then buried. According to the disaster interpretation, it is possible Abraham felt justified in his actions toward her and Isaac because it saved the tribe from a larger catastrophe. But at what cost? In this disaster scenario, is it likely that Abraham felt guilt or felt like a hero? Perhaps it does not matter what Abraham felt. The unforgivable burial of voices—of Isaac, of Sarah, of Iphigenia—is its own disaster. The next section will examine both feminist and transgender interpretations of the Akedah that attempt to retrieve these lost and buried voices, which is its own disaster.

## 2.9 Feminist and Transgender Interpretations

Amongst several compelling and competing feminist interpretations of the Akedah, there seems to be some consensus regarding the methodology as it concerns Genesis 22.<sup>192</sup> As a starting point, it is painfully apparent that Sarah is entirely missing from the story despite being wife to Abraham and mother to Isaac. Her voice, presence, and unique perspective play no direct role in the unfolding narrative and this seems to be *because* she is a woman misperceived as deficient while living in an androcentric context.<sup>193</sup> Part of the feminist method is to identify the ways in which female characters are ignored, undervalued, silenced, and controlled, in order to challenge these practices and critique their underlying causes. Once these obstacles have been removed, the feminist reader can begin the work of retrieving, recuperating, and re-envisioning the marginalized and underrepresented lives of women on their own terms.<sup>194</sup> I would argue this is analogous, on an ontic level,<sup>195</sup> to Heidegger's strategies of *Abbau* (dismantling, un-building) and *Destruktion* (destruction) from the early Freiburg period to *Being and Time*. For

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<sup>192</sup> Zierler, "In Search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah," op. cit., pp. 10-26; Phyllis Trible, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah," *Not in Heaven: Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, ed. Jason P. Rosenblatt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 170-191; Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, *Revisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), pp. 117-118.

<sup>193</sup> Zierler, "A Feminist Reading of the Akedah," *The Akedah Project* (Jewish Live, Judaism Unbound, 929 English, Oshman Family, BINA: 2020), video. Also, Zieler, "In Search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah," op. cit., p. 14. Regarding this so-called deficiency, Zierler lists "feminine ethical deficiency" and "Sarah's light-headedness—her physical, psychic, and spiritual weakness" as typical traits discussed in some of the Aggadah midrashim on the Akedah.

<sup>194</sup> Goldstein, op. cit., p. 117.

<sup>195</sup> Heidegger distinguishes between beings (*das Seiende*) and Being (*das Sein*), which is not itself a being but is the "lighting-process by which beings are illumined as beings." William J. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), p. 6. For Heidegger, Being is the ultimate focus of his interrogations which lies within the realm of fundamental ontology. In contrast, the focus here is on one particular kind of being, namely female human beings, which would fall under Heidegger's conception of the ontic. Despite this difference in focus, the hermeneutic method can be applied to both the ontic and ontological spheres. The core task of dismantling and retrieving remains the same regardless. See, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, op. cit., §4. See also, Martin Heidegger, *Ontology—the Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 1-2.

Heidegger, destruction is a necessary aspect of his method of phenomenological hermeneutics, which is fundamentally a project of interpretation. Heidegger translates the ancient Greek word *hermeneuein* into German as *Auslegen*, which can be translated into English as disclosing and explaining what was previously hidden. Ultimately, interpretation is a project of discovery and recovery.<sup>196</sup> The hermeneutic method is only able to succeed insofar as it is able to destroy and dismantle the overlaid accretions of inferior interpretations and understandings, for example, historical, cultural, philosophical, and theological. Thus, hermeneutic recovery needs destruction in order to do its work. Heidegger provides a succinct summary: “Hermeneutics carries out its tasks only on the path of destruction.”<sup>197</sup>

For a feminist reading the Akedah, there must be a razing and removal of superficial and misguided views about women that serve to bury the female experience in layers of sedimentary leavings. This kind of destruction is not negative or annihilatory because its final aim is a positive one: to recover the female lived experience and to let women speak. Or, as Zierler puts it, “I have endeavored to bring the shadowy presence of Sarah in Genesis 22 into the light, to dig her out of her textual burial plot and show how, despite her absence from Mount Moriah and in the specific verses of Genesis 22, she lives on and loves on.”<sup>198</sup> Heidegger, regarding his project of fundamental ontology, puts it memorably when he writes that hermeneutics must “hunt down the alienation.”<sup>199</sup> In the Akedah, Sarah becomes a stranger, estranged, reduced to someone other than Abraham’s trusted partner who thinks, who loves, who suffers, who acts.

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<sup>196</sup> Heidegger, *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, op. cit., pp. 6-16.

<sup>197</sup> Heidegger, “Phenomenological Interpretations in Connection with Aristotle: An Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation (1922),” *Supplements: From the Earliest Essays to Being and Time and Beyond*, ed. John van Buren (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), p.124.

<sup>198</sup> Zierler, “In Search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah,” op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>199</sup> Heidegger, *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, op. cit., 11.

But what revisions of Sarah are retrieved and brought into the light of day? Tribble emphasizes Sarah's unique motherly attachment to Isaac and then, surprisingly, judges her attachment as problematic and an obstacle to the proper devotion to God.<sup>200</sup> Tribble's way of putting Sarah back into the Akedah is to claim that *she*, not Abraham, was the better person to undergo this spiritual exercise. In Tribble's interpretation, the purpose of the Akedah is, much like the test of obedience interpretation, fundamentally a crucible that burns away the impurities of attachment to family and tribe in order for the diamond of faith to shine for all to see. In the Akedah, this pure diamond is Abraham standing on the mountain detached from everything else but God thereby exemplifying *total* devotion and obedience.<sup>201</sup> Because of Sarah's deep attachment to Isaac, Tribble claims that she should have been tested and as a correlate been the central character of the Akedah. Tribble seems not to doubt that Sarah could have passed the test and been just as faithful as Abraham. Ultimately, it was Sarah's chance to become the exemplar of faith that was sacrificed in the Akedah.

In contrast to Tribble's interpretation, Goldstein argues that Sarah's invisibility in the Akedah was purposeful.<sup>202</sup> This approach aligns with viewing the goal of the story as a test of disobedience. Sarah's attachment and love for Isaac, her family, and her tribe, is seen as a central *virtue*. So, before the trial even begins, she has already passed the test. It is Abraham who needs to be taught how to love and when to say no, which is a central feminist question. She states:

The general question of the Akedah is at what point do we say no to the voice, whether that is the voice of God, the voice in our head, the voice of society, or the voice of authority—at what point do we say *no, that far I am not prepared to go*. [...] Abraham

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<sup>200</sup> Tribble, op. cit., pp. 278-279.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>202</sup> Elyse Goldstein, "A Feminist ReVision," *The Akedah Project* (Jewish Live, Judaism Unbound, 929 English, Oshman Family, BINA: 2020), video.

failed the test because the test was when do you say no. If that is not a feminist question, then I don't know what is.<sup>203</sup>

If Sarah had been made visible in the story, allowed to play a role alongside of Abraham, then the story would have ended much sooner, likely by the third verse. If the next morning Abraham had confided in Sarah about God's command to kill Isaac, then given her wisdom it would have been *her* to stay his hand and not an angel of the Lord, sparing everyone involved the lasting trauma the ordeal inflicted.

Zieler takes the theme of Sarah's "legacy of love" and explains how high the stakes are at this moment in the Torah. She states, "The Akedah story pits love of family against love of God."<sup>204</sup> By the end of the story of Abraham's spiritual trial and Isaac's near-death experience, the principle of love invoked in Genesis 22:2 is completely missing, leaving only awe and fear and their traumatic consequences. Zierler notes that the ancient Hebrew word for love, *ahavah*, first appears in the Torah in Genesis 22:2. Up to this point it had not appeared anywhere in the Hebrew Bible, not in the garden of Eden, not in Noah's trial, and not even in Abraham's marriage to Sarah. It first appears in the context of God giving His directive to Abraham to take his favored son Isaac "whom he loves" and sacrifice him.<sup>205</sup> By Genesis 22:16, after the stay of execution, God does not describe Isaac as a loved one any longer.

With love for family now absent from the story and Sarah dead from grief, Abraham goes into a period of profound mourning mentioned only once in Genesis 23:4.<sup>206</sup> He then requests a burial plot for Sarah so that he may "bury my dead out of my sight." Alicia Ostriker provides an important insight into the phrase "out of my sight." She notes:

This interesting phrase, usually erased in modern translations, firmly emphasizes Sarah's disappearance. The Hebrew word *milefanai* literally means "from my face," or

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Zieler, "In Search of a Feminist Interpretation of the Akedah," op. cit. p. 22.

<sup>205</sup> Tanakh, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

“from before my face”; idiomatically, it means “away from my presence.” [...] Sarah must not merely die and be buried but must be eliminated from presence, that is, from consciousness.<sup>207</sup>

Genesis provides no details about Abraham’s mourning nor the complex motives for needing to erase the presence of her face from his face. This elision provides an important opening for my reflections on pathological mourning and the tasks of poetry in the coming chapters. For Zieler, the goal is to find a counter-text that restores Sarah as an embodiment of love and a model of faith for those of us “who want to live and love God with our children [...]”.<sup>208</sup> She finds it in Genesis 24:67, which is the second time in the Torah that the word love (*ahavah*) is used, and it is connected to Sarah. The text reads, “Isaac then brought her [Rebekah] into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother’s death.”<sup>209</sup> At the very moment Isaac experiences love for Rebekah, Abraham is not mentioned at all; it is Sarah who returns. Sarah’s tent symbolizes hospitality and acceptance of the son and daughter-in-law and the importance of familial love and human connection.

It is clear from these feminist readings that Sarah is constrained within rigidly defined gender roles determined within a patriarchal society that does not understand her, value her, or see her fit to be Abraham’s or God’s trusted confidante; but there is so much more to the story. Joy Ladin reapproaches the Torah through a transgender perspective that is both critical and personal. Ladin’s reading of the Akedah unearths hitherto unknown meanings and possibilities that provide empathy and illuminate nuances of what Ladin terms *trans experience*. Ladin, who is transgender herself and brings personal experiences to bear on her writing, describes being

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<sup>207</sup> Ostriker quoted in Zieler, “In Search of a Feminist Interpretation of the Akedah,” op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 21

<sup>209</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., 36.

transgender as “having a sense of self that does not fit the traditional binary gender categories of male and female.”<sup>210</sup> What Ladin terms *trans experience* denotes both the experience of challenging or rejecting one or more aspects of one’s assigned gender role and what she terms “the nightmare of gender,” which is when a person conforms completely to their gender role with devastating consequences to themselves and others.<sup>211</sup> It is a primary concern of Ladin’s study to explain how trans experiences affect all kinds of people whether or not they identify as transgender. Ladin states:

Few people identify as transgender, but most people have trans experiences: experiences, however brief, of acting in ways that don’t fit our usual gender roles. Unlike transgender identities, most trans experiences don’t disrupt or challenge the gender binary distinction between male and female. People continue to be seen, and to see themselves, as male or female, during, and after trans experiences that displace us from our assigned gender roles; we remain men and women, even if we feel like, or become, different kinds of men and women.<sup>212</sup>

Ladin explores the trans experiences of all the main characters in the Akedah. Though they remain identified as men and women, their identities are “utterly transformed.”<sup>213</sup>

For Abraham (then known as Abram), his first trans experience comes when God commands him to leave his home and family for a foreign land in Genesis 12:1.<sup>214</sup> Abram obeys and betrays his status of primogeniture, namely, the rights and obligations bestowed upon him for being the first-born son.<sup>215</sup> By rejecting this life-defining gender role, Abram ventures into a literal and figurative wilderness. His second trans experience comes when God, sealing a

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<sup>210</sup> Joy Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2019), p. 15.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-65.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>214</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

<sup>215</sup> Ladin, op cit., p. 62.

covenant between them, gives Abram a new name—Abraham—and orders the circumcisions of all males in the tribe, including himself. As Ladin remarks:

Abraham's manhood-altering circumcision marks a new stage in the gender transition that began with his abandonment of his role as firstborn son. Aside from abandoning his father and his firstborn role, before his circumcision, Abraham was a familiar kind of Iron Age man: a husband, a father (to Ishmael), the patriarch of his small, wandering clan. Circumcision transforms him from the head of a single nomadic household into "the father of a multitude of nations" [...]. Abraham's abandonment of his firstborn role was a private, family affair. His name change publicly signifies that he has become a different kind of man who had never existed before [...].<sup>216</sup>

Despite the physical and emotional pain of the circumcision and shift in identity, Abraham's obedience to God in this moment foreshadows the apex of his trans experience in the Akedah.

For Sarah, the moment that most exemplifies her trans experience is when, despite the physical impossibility of bearing a child at the age of ninety, God twice announces that she will. Given her status as a childless elderly woman, presumably barren, Ladin speculates that she likely felt like a failure as a woman by not living up to the expectations of her gender role—another moment of trans experience. Thus, the news from God of a miraculous birth strikes Sarah as both absurd and cruel provoking a kind of cynical laughter at the thought of it. But she does conceive and birth a child, a son named Isaac. Ladin states, "Sarah's pregnancy makes her a kind of woman who cannot be understood in terms of those [gender] roles at all. According to binary definitions, Sarah can either be an old woman or a new mother, but not both."<sup>217</sup> God affirms this new identity and gender role by changing her name from Sarai to Sarah, which simultaneously establishes God's new role and deeper connection with Sarah.

If both Abraham and Sarah undergo trans experiences that transgress and redefine gender roles, Isaac is fundamentally in lockstep with his gender expectations. In childhood,

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

adolescence, and manhood, Isaac does not waver as a son in his obedience to his father nor does he disappoint in his own later role as patriarch and father in providing and protecting sons that will establish a future nation of Jewish people. Ladin observes:

Unlike his father, mother, wife, and second-born son, Isaac, in his relationship to God, does not do anything that violates or transforms the gender roles he was born into. But as Sarah's gender failure shows, devotion to being the women or men we are supposed to be can also lead to trans experience. In one of the most horrifying stories in the Torah, traditionally called the Akedah [...], God turns Isaac's firstborn status role upside down, so that his position as beloved son and heir makes him a target of his father's divinely ordered violence.<sup>218</sup>

In an uncanny parallel, both Abraham and Isaac stubbornly obey their fathers (divine and human) and thereby disturb their gender roles as fathers and sons. For Isaac, this means that he is not only bound by his father, but he is also bound by his gender to be the good son who loves, trusts, and obeys, who is the inheritor and not an innovator.<sup>219</sup> This trust in his father and conformity to his assigned gender role leads him to the alter of his destruction. Though some interpreters estimate that Isaac is in his thirties, in this episode he acts and talks like a small child in his unquestioning stance toward his father. Ladin finds a powerful type of trans experience at the heart of Isaac's traumatic ordeal:

He [Isaac] is living out a terrible form of trans experience, the nightmare of gender, because trans people know what a nightmare it can be and what kinds of violent attention can be focused on you because of the gender role that you are assigned at birth. For trans people, that is because we often do not fit that role or we are violating it—but not always. In some families you are just trying to conform and submerge your trans identity, but the terms of the gender role you are given are so horrific.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>219</sup> Joy Ladin, "A Transgender Perspective," *The Akedah Project* (Jewish Live, Judaism Unbound, 929 English, Oshman Family, BINA: 2020), video.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

Though Isaac is not transgender, he has fully accepted his role as son, but the terms of this acceptance are nightmarish. Like a boy who is told to be tough and not cry, like a young man who signs up to be a soldier because it is expected in his family, like a woman who stays with an abusive man because she has been taught that she must support and obey him and that violence towards women is somehow deserved, rigid gender roles and their uncritical acceptance can have disastrous consequences.<sup>221</sup> Reading the Akedah through the lens of shared trans experiences that impact both transgender and cisgender people alike, breaks new ground for interpreting the Akedah that provides both insight and empathy.

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER THREE | MANIA AND MELANCHOLIA I

Age, and the deaths, and the ghosts. / Her having gone away... / Hosts / of regrets  
come and find me empty. // I don't feel this will change. / I don't want any thing / or  
person, familiar or strange. / I don't think I will sing // any more just now; / or ever.<sup>222</sup>

—John Berryman

### 3.1 In the Aftermath of Trauma

An important shared characteristic of healthy and pathological mourning is the phenomenon of traumatic loss that causes both to initiate their dynamic processes in response. Psychic trauma is not simply a mental wound as opposed to a physical one, but an “inexperienced experience”<sup>223</sup> caused by “overwhelming affect”<sup>224</sup> resulting in a “time of no time.”<sup>225</sup> Intrusive, destructive, and repetitive thoughts and feelings characterize psychic trauma if left to worsen without treatment. From Freud onward, psychic trauma describes the mind in a state of serious injury where its vital integrity is in danger. A survivor of a cataclysmic train derailment, a soldier returning from an inhumane war, a victim of child sexual abuse or gender-based violence, or, like Orpheus, a person failing their beloved spouse and thereby losing them forever—these are classic case studies of psychic trauma that invite the interpreter to look beneath the surface pain to the psychological mechanisms at work below. Given their violent origins, psychic traumas appear as open wounds that seemingly never close on their own,

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<sup>222</sup> John Berryman, *John Berryman: Selected Poems*, ed. Kevin Young (New York: The Library of America, 2004), pp. 169-170.

<sup>223</sup> Richard Kearney, “Writing Trauma: Narrative Catharsis in Homer, Shakespeare and Joyce,” in *In the Wake of Trauma: Psychology and Philosophy for the Suffering Other* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2016), p. 87.

<sup>224</sup> Stolorow, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>225</sup> Riley, op. cit., 84-85.

continuously interrupting the self.<sup>226</sup> From a practical standpoint, a person's spontaneous freedom to act in the world is undermined by psychic trauma.<sup>227</sup> It divides the sufferer and undermines their conscious capacity to move beyond it.

The traumatized self can be likened to a piece of glass dropped from a great height. The notion of *shattering* is commonly used in trauma studies to describe affected persons.<sup>228</sup> When psychic trauma devolves into melancholia, the sufferer might be compared to Dante's description of Satan in Canto 34—weeping from his three pairs of eyes while his three sets of wings flap furiously at the cold air, he freezes himself in a block of ice made from his own tears.<sup>229</sup> This tortured figure poignantly illustrates the new world of post-traumatic subjectivity and the hell of melancholia—a guilt-ridden self frozen in time and stripped of possibility.

Psychic trauma can be characterized as an inexperienced experience, which suggests a scenario wherein a person is involved in a significantly injurious event that cannot be processed or understood in the present and thereby impacting memory far into the future. Despite the person's direct involvement and their concomitant pain, the event exists on a plane of unconsciousness or at least in the “untouristed parts of one's consciousness.”<sup>230</sup> Paradoxically, both trauma and melancholia undermine memory while binding a person to their past. For the traumatized person, time is elastic: it marches on so fast and then in an instant, triggered by a smell or a photograph, they are snapped back to the wounding moment like *no time* has passed to relive the violence. For the melancholic, time becomes arrested altogether.

The work of mourning involves processing and accepting the loss of a loved one and ultimately moving forward in one's life by reconnecting with people and establishing new

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<sup>226</sup> Kearney, “Writing Trauma,” p. 8.

<sup>227</sup> Westphal, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>228</sup> Stolorow, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>229</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, Canto III, trans. Carlyle-Wicksteed (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), p. 22.

<sup>230</sup> Don DeLillo, *Unpublished Letter to David Foster Wallace*, The Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas at Austin, folder 101.10, dated November 6, 1996.

relationships. As we shall see in Chapter 5, one of the tasks of poetry is to aid these aspirations. In contrast, pathological mourning occurs when healthy mourning is interrupted by guilt.<sup>231</sup> It manifests in a continuum of self-destructive behaviors and states of mind that move between two opposed yet intertwined poles—melancholia on one end and melancholia’s denial, mania, on the other.<sup>232</sup>

The melancholic person has lost their sense of wonder about their future life. They are certain that nothing good can come out of the future and no word could ever forgive or redeem them; they are usually not surprised or alarmed when something bad happens almost as if they were expecting it. There is a monstrous harmony between a cruel conscience and a self desperate to be punished. Nested within this pairing lies a deep division in their sense of self between who they thought they were and who they have become, namely, a person devastated by an irretrievable loss they have caused and therefore irrevocably guilty. As Critchley observes, when the melancholic commits suicide it is really something more akin to homicide because they believe they are *killing the hated other that they have become*.<sup>233</sup>

Mania, on the other hand, denies the causes and consequences of melancholia. For the manic person, the dead come back to life, what was lost is recovered, and guilt is not even a relic of memory. If mania is a delusional flight from an unlivable reality, then it must inevitably crash back to earth leaving the pathological mourner in an even more precarious position. In mania, the higher the rise, the harder the fall.

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<sup>231</sup> Freud, MM, pp. 20-21.

<sup>232</sup> Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 13-18.

<sup>233</sup> Critchley, *How to Stop Living and Start Worrying*, op. cit., p. 67.

### 3.2 Narcissism and Substitution

Melancholia is inherently narcissistic. In “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” Freud writes the following regarding his clarificatory conception of narcissism: “A patient suffering from hysteria or obsessional neurosis has also, as far as his illness extends, *given up his relation to reality*.”<sup>234</sup> *Cathexis*, a central though polysemous term in psychoanalysis, translates Freud’s use of the German words *Besetzen* and *Besetzung*, which literally mean *to occupy* and *occupation*.<sup>235</sup> *Besetzen* has a range of other connotations in the context, for example, to invest, to hold fast, to possess, to retain, and to attach.<sup>236</sup> Freud stress that who the melancholic holds on to holds so much “significance” that the relation demands a “large expenditure of psychical energy” as it is a relationship of deep value “long maintained and habitually occurring.”<sup>237</sup> In pathological mourning, the cathexis operates at the level of “love,” “reinforced by a thousand links,” and by an intense “fixation” on who is cathected.<sup>238</sup>

For the melancholic, cathexis signifies an intensely intimate connecting to something or someone.<sup>239</sup> In melancholia, to cathect with a loved object, which is how Freud dispassionately refers to both people and things, means to try and take possession of *and* to be possessed by the object.<sup>240</sup> In a non-pathological case, one person’s deep cathexis to another person who, as the love-object engages and captures their attention and emotions, requires a great amount of psychic energy to maintain and develop. It both seizes and sets a person in motion filling the present to an excess that overflows into the future. But for the person suffering from

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<sup>234</sup> Freud, ON., p. 4. Italics mine.

<sup>235</sup> Peter Hoffer, “Reflections on *Cathexis*,” *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, LXXIV, 2005, p. 1127.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., pp. 1128-1131.

<sup>237</sup> Freud, MM, p. 30 and 32.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 25 and 32.

<sup>239</sup> Nandor Fodor, *Freud: Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), p.

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<sup>240</sup> Freud, MM, p. 25. See the discussion of substitution and introjection that follows below.

pathological mourning, cathexis is always a hyper-cathexis to something or someone that has no future.

It might be useful to imagine this intense connection as a bungee cord tethering the person to another person *qua* love-object. Due to the separate agencies of each person and the changeable environment and events that ground and surround them, the cord is always in a fluctuating state of tension and motion. There is a large investment of time and effort involved in this cathectic tethering. The lover's reality or world is embodied in the other person, alive, autonomous, and having their own extra-mental existence. But if that real person were to suddenly die and become the so-called "lost object," it is as if the bungee cord snaps and recoils violently back to the mourner causing immediate and serious injury. This kind of break with reality is a vivid example of the traumatic loss at the core of both mourning and melancholia. Once intertwined with another's life, the mourner now appears to be utterly alone to tend to the wounds from this painful lashing. This experience of severance might be termed the anti-cathexis of the outside where the narcissistic mourner, as Freud puts it, "turn[s] away from the external world."<sup>241</sup>

Despite this removal from reality, Freud goes on to state, "But analysis shows that he [the narcissist] has by no means broken off his erotic relations to people and things."<sup>242</sup> But how can there be a relation without reality? If for Plato there is something like a two-world ontology of material transiency and metaphysical permanence, then for Freud there is only one reality made of material-erotic cathexes and the devastating consequences of their finitude on a fragile mind. The internal topography of the wounded mind takes shape *within* the anti-cathexis of the outside as its cathectic energy turns and remains inward. This narcissistic inner world

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<sup>241</sup> Freud, ON, p. 4

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

within reality is the realm of melancholia and delusional phantasy. As Freud puts it, “He [the narcissist] still retains them [cathexes] in phantasy...he has...*substituted* for real objects imaginary ones from his memory.”<sup>243</sup> So, where there was absence there is a new, albeit unreal, presence in the narcissist’s melancholic mind. Where there was a cathexis to a real love-object, there is now a new cathexis with an object that only exists in the mourner’s mind—the lost-object.

This process of bringing into the traumatized ego the disconnected cathectic cord together with the phantasy love-object is termed introjection.<sup>244</sup> The phantasy love-object is immediately identified as the love-object itself, which is now called the abandoned, forsaken, or lost-object to distinguish it from the real person who has perished.<sup>245</sup> A cathexis is then reestablished by attaching a part of the mournful self directly to the lost-object that abides in their mind. As Freud states, “The libido [cathexis] that has been withdrawn from the external world has been directed to the ego and thus gives rise to an attitude which may be called narcissism.”<sup>246</sup> This turning away from reality is simultaneously a turning toward and into the self. In the movement of introjection, the self and its cathectic connective tissue are severed from the love-object and viciously thrown (*-ject*) back inside (*intro-*) itself. Unlike the boat that can maneuver and endure the force of crashing waves and steer clear of disaster’s flotsam and jetsam, the melancholic narcissist is a sunken ship stuck in a cave at the bottom of the ocean; the cave is the mind itself. The lost-object is the introjected object, which is not real but a product of the mourner’s imagination made from the stuff of memory and fantasy; a phantom so real that its falseness is a secret—the paradox of a close-up mirage. This gives fresh sense to

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid. Italics mine.

<sup>244</sup> Freud, MM, pp. 24-25.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>246</sup> Freud, ON, p. 5.

the idea that every love story is a ghost story.<sup>247</sup> It also points us in the direction of the myth of Narcissus, which I will turn to later in the chapter.

This first identification *of* the lost-object transforms into an identification *with* the lost-object where a part of the mind begins the process of fixating, imitating, and slowly becoming it.<sup>248</sup> But what is the purpose of this narcissistic undertaking? As Freud explains it, “The narcissistic identification with the object then becomes a *substitute* for the erotic cathexis, the result of which is...the love-relation need not be given up.”<sup>249</sup> In a more succinct and poignant formulation, Freud writes, “by taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction.”<sup>250</sup> Thus, at the heart of what devolves into a pathological state of mind is the motive to resurrect the dead to be loved as passionately as they were in life.

The shared genesis of healthy mourning and pathological mourning is the traumatic loss of a love-object and their shared work is the narcissistic substitution of that object. It is at this point, however, that they diverge and substitution mutates. Due to the unrelenting guilt inherent in melancholia, the new cathexis with the substitute lost-object increases in intensity and changes its function. If in mourning, the reestablished cathexis manifests in being occupied with and by the lost-object, in melancholia it is more like being *captured* and held *hostage*. This is an entirely different strain of substitution.<sup>251</sup>

The *sub* in substitution suggests not only “a lower [less real] relation” of imagined object to ego, but it also denotes an *under*, that is, something *hidden under* and ultimately secret. This

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<sup>247</sup> This phrase, ultimately found to be unattributable, was used by David Foster Wallace two times in his writing, once in a letter and then again in an early draft of his last novel. Following Wallace’s death, the phrase became the title of D. T. Max’s biography of Wallace. See D. T. Max, “DFW: Tracing the Ghostly Origins of a Phrase,” *The New Yorker*, 11 December 2012. [www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/d-f-w-tracing-the-ghostly-origins-of-a-phrase](http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/d-f-w-tracing-the-ghostly-origins-of-a-phrase)

<sup>248</sup> Freud, MM, p. 25.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid. Italics mine.

<sup>250</sup> Freud, MM, p. 21

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 22-27.

seems to suggest that the process of substitution and its mutation occur so suddenly and seamlessly that it escapes notice of the conscious mind. As Freud states, the pathological mourner “is aware of the loss that has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him.”<sup>252</sup> I interpret this *in him* as meaning *in the pathological mourner himself*. Contra Critchley, it is not the loss itself that is unknown.<sup>253</sup> Instead, what remains unknown is the extent of the damage in the melancholic’s mind from the first wound of losing the love-object and from the further wounds that result from the persecuting lost-object, which are essentially secondary self-inflicted wounds caused by guilt and resulting in the “emptying of the ego until it is *totally* impoverished.”<sup>254</sup> This is what is lost in him that evades his understanding.

If the healthy mourner is deeply saddened and saturated with painful emotions, the melancholic experiences what might be termed an *annihilatory* sadness. As Freud states, the melancholic experiences “an impoverishment of the ego on a grand scale. In [healthy] morning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.”<sup>255</sup> To theorize about melancholia is to survey the topography of this barren wasteland and to test the soil for deadly toxins. What appears to the pathological mourner as a newly established cathexis with the living love-object in a safe remove from reality and a simple substitution that sutures the wounds of temporary grief, is actually something more sinister and heartbreaking. An image from the film *The Shining* (1980) seems relevant here.<sup>256</sup> In one scene involving the protagonist of the film, the audience is led to believe that he is dancing and kissing a beautiful woman in the bathroom of room 237 in the hotel where he is caretaker for the winter. The scene crescendos

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>253</sup> Critchley, *How to Stop Living and Start Worrying*, op. cit., p.49.

<sup>254</sup> Freud, MM, p. 29. Italics mine.

<sup>255</sup> MM, p.22.

<sup>256</sup> Stanley Kubrick, *The Shining* (United States: Warner Bros., 1980).

when the living woman is revealed in the mirror to be the corpse of a woman who had committed suicide in the bathtub. There is a shock of recognition at the horrifying reality that the protagonist is holding the woman's dead and decaying body in his arms (see Figure 6). Analogously, the pathological mourner believes he is keeping his love alive when in fact he is embracing a corpse-like substitute but without detecting the self-induced subterfuge.

**Figure 6**  
The Reality of Substitution



Scene from *The Shining* (1980), © Getty Images

The cathectic embrace of the melancholic is a form of *hyper-cathexis* further distinguishing itself from healthy mourning.<sup>257</sup> The hyper in hyper-cathexis does its work

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<sup>257</sup> Freud, "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (Standard Edition I, 1950), pp. 177–397.

alongside the *sub* in substitution without detecting it. The hyper in hyper-cathexis signifies both the increased intensity of the cathexis with the lost-object, but also the increased duration of its grip on the melancholic which can last for weeks, months, or even years. Thus, the substitution is more substantial compared to healthy mourning.

Among its polysemous layers, substitution also denotes *to lay before the mind* and *to place in the rear*. In one sense, the lost-object is laid before the mind as its sole obsessive focus of attention while the underlying terrible reality of loss is placed in the rear—out of sight, out of mind, so to speak. Put another way, the act of substitution at the heart of melancholic narcissism operates clandestinely just below the conscious mind, repressed and encrypted. The unconscious or *subconscious* has been likened to a crypt where overwhelming traumas are buried and silenced.<sup>258</sup> Given the guilt and denial at the heart of pathological mourning, I would argue that it is also like an evidence locker placed in the dark corner of a flooding basement where proof of mortal wounds are kept under lock and key. The subconscious is in some way a chamber within a chamber (the mind) within a chamber (body) existing at the farthest remove from consciousness. And like a chamber in a gun, it is loaded and waiting to fire at any trespassers. And yet this chamber within chambers is an expression of narcissism, which means the gun is always pointed at oneself.

To be sure, it could be argued that this type of narcissism is just an extreme kind of self-centeredness, but I would argue it is crucial to draw a distinction between this type and the everyday use of the term. In normal usage, a narcissistic person is self-centered and routinely acts as if their own personal priorities ought to take precedence or otherwise dictate the world's priorities. In other words, the self-centered narcissist focuses on himself at the *exclusion* of

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<sup>258</sup> N. Abraham and M. Torok, "Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection *versus* Incorporation," in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 130-131.

connections to other people and their agency. As Aaron James argues, this kind of self-centeredness is a necessary component of being an *asshole*.<sup>259</sup> The selfish asshole thinks himself totally justified in enjoying systematic special advantages over others while also being totally immune to their complaints, desires, and perspectives.<sup>260</sup> In short, the other person is not a factor in the asshole's mind at all. As James colorfully puts the matter, assholes act like every day is their birthday and nobody else gets a turn.<sup>261</sup>

With the narcissism at work in pathological mourning, things are more complicated. Reeling from the loss of the love-object, the narcissist introjects a version of the other person in their mind so the beloved can live and be protected from harm. The line between the image of the other and the real other is blurred from the start. This blurred boundary is the invisible crack that begins to split the self *against* itself. The *other within the self* is just the self looking at its own reflection in the mirror but mistaking the mirror for an open window where the real other can escape from a burning house. This obsessive hyper-cathexis to the introjected object *takes the place* of new cathexes with real others. The pathological mourner believes themselves to be saving their real love and working to atone for their sins against them, while in reality they have withdrawn from the world and retreated into themselves. The unintended consequence of substitution is that this simulacrum of the love-object becomes a constant reminder of the melancholic's guilt over how they failed it.

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<sup>259</sup> Aaron James, *Assholes: A Theory* (New York: Random House, 2014), pp. 4-7.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

### 3.3 Substitution and Guilt

Levinas writes extensively on the concept of substitution. As Critchley observes, “Substitution, both the text<sup>262</sup> and the concept, is the centre of the centre of Levinas’ later work [...]”<sup>263</sup> For Levinas, this intense focus on substitution evolves within his larger project of reconceptualizing and reprioritizing ethics and challenging Heidegger’s prioritization of Being over everything else as well as his decision to become a Nazi and endorse Hitlerism. Levinas explains:

[T]he relation to the other for Heidegger is present only as a moment of being in the world. [The] relation to another person as the beginning of new concepts, and a new comportment...is absent in Heidegger. [...] [T]he ethical is the spiritual itself and...nothing surpasses the ethical. The surpassing of the ethical is precisely the beginning of all violence. It is especially important to recognize this after the events that occurred between 1933 and 1945 [...]. To recognize the unsurpassable quality of the ethical is...the fundamental lesson and first truth.<sup>264</sup>

Despite Levinas’ innovative efforts to create a new vocabulary to seek “the meaning of the ethical” and his countless endeavors to explore themes and threads that lie outside (or before) consciousness and being itself, Levinas’ ultimate concern is to love the real person who faces you and to render them help from harm. Levinas states, “Ethics [is] a comportment in which the other...*matters* to you.”<sup>265</sup> Or as he puts it, “The other concerns me in all his material misery. It is a matter, eventually, of nourishing him, of clothing him.”<sup>266</sup> Regarding love of the other person, Levinas avers, “[T]his goodness, this nonindifference to the death of the other, this kindness, is precisely the very perfection of love.”<sup>267</sup> Quoting Vassily Grossman when he writes

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<sup>262</sup> Levinas, OTB, pp. 99-129.

<sup>263</sup> Simon Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Kindle, location 1870.

<sup>264</sup> Levinas, RTB, p. 131.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, p. 49.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

that “there is neither God nor the Good, but there is goodness,” Levinas concludes “[that] is also my thesis. That is all that is left to mankind.”<sup>268</sup> Levinas’ philosophy aims to transcend outmoded theories of ethics and subjectivity and to interrupt the natural, trenchant selfishness of human beings that inevitably materializes in conflict. Reappropriating Spinoza, Levinas refers to the idea of *conatus essendi* as signifying the essence of all beings whereby a being endeavors to persist in its own being even at the expense of other beings. According to Levinas, this principle of *conatus essendi* “takes dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one other and are thus together.”<sup>269</sup> For Levinas, the goal of ethics is to overturn “‘the order of things’ [*conatus essendi*], that *for-the-other* shattering the ‘in-itself’ [to bring] ‘peace to the one who is far off and to the one who is near.’”<sup>270</sup> This peace begins in the concern for the other. As Levinas states, “To me, the other is the other human being.”<sup>271</sup>

Levinas’ project as sketched above is inherently valuable and an important contribution to philosophy, but in what follows I want to read him *against the grain*. That is, I want to examine motifs taken from his writing on substitution and interpret them as discourse about pathological mourning. Instead of seeing in Levinas an attempt to theorize the essential elements of the ethical and our “holy” obligation to help the living person, I will approach his central motifs from the opposite direction, namely, as a text engaging and grappling with the essential elements of narcissistic melancholia where there is no living other and no more cathexes to the outside. In other words, I want to interpret Levinas as writing about the experience of *failing to keep the other person alive* and the guilt that transforms traumatic loss and narcissism into melancholia. Further, I want to treat Levinas’ chapter on substitution in

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid, p. 89.

<sup>269</sup> Levinas, OTB, 4.

<sup>270</sup> Levinas, RTB, p. 251.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

*Otherwise Than Being* as if it were a prose poem performing or enacting melancholia even while it discusses it. Levinas has never been approached and interpreted in these ways, but I will argue that by doing so nuances will be uncovered regarding melancholia and Levinasian motifs will be seen in a new light.

Holte dedicates an entire monograph on Levinas and melancholy, but never provides a full exploration of the concept.<sup>272</sup> They quote Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* a few times but neglect some of the most essential parts of the experience, namely, the intensity of the cathectic connection, introjection, identification, and substitution. Holte seems satisfied to approach melancholy in a more "general" way as a crisis of meaninglessness where the melancholic recognizes and accepts that metaphysics only provides illusions, and that God is truly dead.<sup>273</sup> One of the inferences Holte draws from this is that melancholy "lacks an object to mourn."<sup>274</sup> This contradicts the core components of the very psychoanalytic theory they claim to be using to critique Levinas. Holte not only undertheorizes melancholy but patently misunderstands it.

Spargo's monograph, *The Ethics of Mourning*, also undertheorizes melancholia and, in my assessment, argues for a dangerous and misguided application of it.<sup>275</sup> The core thesis of Spargo's text is that there are "cultural norms that encourage us to forget [the dead] in order to function."<sup>276</sup> Their answer to this problem of erasing the dead others is to appropriate melancholia as a solution to forgetting. Spargo states, "I interpret melancholia...[as a] persistent sign of a dedication to the time and realm of the other."<sup>277</sup> Spargo argues that melancholia's

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<sup>272</sup> Stine Holte, *Meaning and Melancholia in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas* (Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

“appreciation of the other” and its ability to refuse consolations, makes it an ideal tool for the ethical practice of remembering and memorializing dead “others.” Their thesis appears to be that a “resistant and incomplete mourning [melancholia] stands for an ethical acknowledgment of—or perhaps ceding to—the radical alterity of the other whom one mourns [...] presuming that mourning [melancholia] is ethical insofar as it supposes an imaginative protection of the other who has already been lost [...]”<sup>278</sup> The obvious objection to this view of melancholia-as-ethical is that it takes the pathology out of pathological mourning. As I will discuss later in the chapter, the unrelenting guilt that divides the self against itself proves to be one explanation of the melancholic’s suicidal tendencies. Spargo never addresses guilt directly and does not see it as an obstacle.

Using mourning and melancholia as interchangeable terms throughout the text, Spargo admits that melancholia is “a perverse prolonged attachment to the deceased” and then goes on to say, “To mourn ethically...would extend only to the point where grief does not prevent the resumption of normal relationships [...]”<sup>279</sup> The fact that Spargo thinks the virtues of melancholia consist in its refusal of consolations and its seemingly endless grief for the other, while also stating that melancholia can only be ethically useful if it does not hinder new cathexes, illustrates a fundamental misunderstanding of how melancholia works and how dangerous it can be for the pathological mourner.<sup>280</sup> The melancholic’s sole focus on and hyper-cathexis to the introjected lost-object comes at the cost of its energy, attention, and ability to

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., p. 13

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 19

<sup>280</sup> I would apply a similar skepticism to Kristeva’s conception of melancholia that sees it as an opportunity for reshaping one’s identity in a positive direction. Referring to an imagined character, Kristeva writes, “Narcissistic wounds...become telescoped into a simultaneously killing and irretrievable burden that organizes her subjectivity; within, she is nothing but bruises and paralysis; outside, all that was left to her was acting out [...]. Isabel *needed* that “black hole” of melancholia in order to construct her living motherhood and activities outside it [...]” Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 87-88. Italics mine.

invest in new cathexes. As I have already pointed out, the melancholic's connection to reality is given up and turned inward. For Spargo to say that a melancholic person is extremely good at remembering the other is like saying a paranoid schizophrenic suffering from auditory hallucinations is extremely good at listening to the other.

To support their conception and application of melancholia, Spargo looks to Levinas for a compatible model because of Levinas' tireless efforts to preserve and promote the good of the other, which includes remembering the other. In contrast, I am arguing that the core of Levinas' ethics, namely, substitution, provides a vivid description of the *hellscape* of melancholia. Levinas, on my interpretation, can be viewed as writing about the experience of melancholia from within it, which traces the contours of self-deception and self-destruction.<sup>281</sup> To remember the other within the context of melancholia is to experience the *imagined* other's accusations and persecutions of a very *real* and withering self. It is to this Levinasian-described *hellscape* that I turn to now.

A recurring central motif in Levinas' *Otherwise Than Being* is the idea that the other is or exists *within* the same. He writes, "The psyche is the other in the same," and on the same page he states that ultimately "A subject is a hostage."<sup>282</sup> Reading these lines within the context

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<sup>281</sup> Levinas' dedication at the beginning of *Otherwise Than Being* states: "To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism." I would argue, though perhaps it is self-evident, that this unfathomable destruction of human life, which includes the murder of Levinas' own father, brothers, and mother-in-law, hovers in the margins of every page and between every line of *Otherwise Than Being*. This traumatism and the possibility that Levinas might have suffered some form of continuous guilt, survivor's guilt for example, only partly explains my idea that *Otherwise than Being*, especially the chapter on substitution, can be read as a discourse on pathological mourning from within that very same experience. But even if we were to bracket out the historical situatedness of the text and the personal circumstances of the author, the obsessive repetition of terms, the focus on the other that persecutes the self from within, and the disturbingly vivid language and imagery that Levinas employs again and again, are enough to shock and stir the reader to feel deeply as much as they have to think deeply about this text and to wonder what caused the author to write this way about these things.

<sup>282</sup> Levinas, OTB, p. 112.

of pathological mourning, we can see how appropriate they are: the psyche in a state of melancholia *is* the other (*qua* substituted lost-object) *in* the same (that is, within the melancholic self). As the lost-object becomes a persecutory presence in the self it transforms the self into a guilt-ridden hostage of the fantasized other within it. Levinas then writes, “This passivity undergone in proximity by the force of an alterity in me [...]. What else can it be but a substitution of me for the others?”<sup>283</sup> The poetic alliteration, assonance, consonance, and near rhymes in the phrase *this passivity suffered*<sup>284</sup> *in proximity* (*cette passivite subie dans la proximite*)<sup>285</sup> taken together with the precision of the phrase *from*<sup>286</sup> *an alterity in me* (*de par une alterite en moi*)<sup>287</sup> are useful and memorable ways of talking about the persecutory work of the introjected lost-object in the self and the feeling that the self is being held captive against its will however paradoxical this appears from the outside. Levinas’ description of this defining melancholic moment as a substitution fits well with the psychoanalytic use of the term. To say that *what* is substituted is *me for the others*, can be read as a penetrating insight into the truth of melancholia. What appears to the pathological mourner as a redemptive substitution of the

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid. I am altering Lingis’ translation of *subie* from “undergone” to “suffering” since it both increases the intensity of the alliteration which exists in the original French and because it better captures the experience of genuine pain involved in this kind of captivity of the self where it is hostage to the other. A person can *undergo* a minor surgical procedure in the span of half an hour and only experience mild discomfort afterwards, but the experience of pathological mourning cuts to the core of one’s identity, adding hurt upon hurt that ultimately cleaves the self into pieces. Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 146.

<sup>285</sup> Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. Again, I alter Lingis’ translation here from “by the force of an alterity in me” to simply “from an alterity in me” for two reasons: my translation is more faithful to the original text and the idea of “force” seems wrong for Levinas’ explicit project in *Otherwise Than Being* and my own engagement with it via pathological mourning. For Levinas, the other is always already within the same, prior to will and decision, and does not need to force itself into the self. Also, the work of the other within the same is not forcible so much as it is haunting in its very presence and in its cry that says *help me, feed me, let me across the threshold into the safety of your home* and *I am always here, but are you there?* See OTB, p. 74. In terms of my approach to Levinas, the appearance of the introjected object within the melancholic self is precisely the opposite of forceful as it arises like a continuous memory and a natural defense against the force of death. In melancholia, it is guilt that inflicts its own kind of violence.

<sup>287</sup> Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, op. cit., p. 146.

lost-object for the real one to keep it alive and protected by their love, is in fact the substitution of a part of the melancholic's self ("me") in order to perform the role of the imagined lost-object that ultimately serves to deny the unbearable reality that the beloved person is gone forever. Levinas' chapter dedicated to substitution articulates the narcissism that powers the pathology of the seemingly endless inward cycle of guilt and grief.<sup>288</sup>

The substitution in melancholia is memorably described when Levinas writes how the refashioned melancholic self is "the contracting of the ego, going to the hither side of identity, gnawing away at its very identity—identity gnawing away at itself—in a remorse."<sup>289</sup> This Levinasian metaphor of *gnawing* complements the Freudian idea that substitution can also be conceived as an imagined *incorporation* of the dead other into the self, "devouring it" and misperceiving it as nourishment instead of the poison in the wound that it is.<sup>290</sup>

Levinas also approaches the motif of the other within the self through the analogy of maternity, but he does not emphasize the joy of creating and celebrating new life.<sup>291</sup> Levinas sketches what I would call *the birth of melancholia*, putting stress on the ambiguity of the double genitive "of" so that it could be read as melancholia's birth *and* birth's melancholia. In the following paragraph Levinas ostensibly explains what he terms the sensibility<sup>292</sup> of the self in substitution, but I will read it as describing the sensation of melancholia and the sensitivity of the pathological mourner who endlessly suffers by carrying the lost object. The twinning of self and lost-object "is a vulnerability and a paining exhausting themselves like a hemorrhage

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-129.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>290</sup> Freud, MM, p. 25.

<sup>291</sup> Levinas, OTB, pp. 74-75.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p. 67. On Levinas' own terms, sensibility is a central term for his conception of ethics that takes the encounter with the other as primary. It is also a term that places him squarely within the history of philosophy and illustrates his own innovative approach to understanding subjectivity. For a detailed account of Levinas' understanding of sensibility and how it relates to Kant and Heidegger, see Ian Leask, "Ethics Overcomes Finitude: Levinas, Kant, and the Davos Legacy," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, volume 79, issue 3 (2005): pp. 447-459.

[...].”<sup>293</sup> In this vein, the “contact” of the substituted lost-object in the traumatized self is a radical “passivity” and a dark passion.<sup>294</sup> Levinas writes:

[The persecuted self-defined by its passivity and sensibility] reverts from grasping to being grasped [...], from the activity of being a hunter to being hunted...to the passivity of being prey, from being aim to being wound. [...] On the hither side of the zero point which marks the absence of protection and cover, sensibility is being affected...being put in question by the alterity of the other [...]. It is a writhing in the tight dimensions of pain...it is being torn up from oneself...it is maternity, gestation of the other in the same. Is not the restlessness of someone persecuted but a modification of maternity, the groaning of the wounded entrails by those it will bear or has borne?<sup>295</sup>

If you replace the word *sensibility* with the word *melancholia*, you transform this text into a poetic reflection of the very moment that healthy mourning morphs into its pathological counterpart. The metaphor of maternity is invoked to illuminate the accusatory and cruel workings of the introjected lost-object on the guilty ego, which writhes in pain at being torn up from the inside. It is this tearing or splitting off of one part of the ego against itself that explains how both hunter and hunted can coexist in the same person. The other within the same is the same within the self at war against itself. The pathological mourner is both host and hostage. Levinas describes this monstrous modification of maternity in a way that suggests the other is already dead but still actively hostile to the ego. The way Levinas poetically personifies the entrails of the other the self has borne as *voicing a groan* is an innovative way to talk about the fact that the other *qua* lost object is something already dead but malignantly resurrected the way a Zombie transfigures and disfigures the corpse of its host. The image of groaning entrails raises the metaphor of maternity to full clarity. If melancholia is a kind of pregnancy and the lost-

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<sup>293</sup> Levinas, OTB, p. 72.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., pp. 74-75.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

object its child, then this is a stillbirth and the loving cathexis to the dead is an infection, a “malady of identity.”<sup>296</sup>

What begins in healthy mourning as an ambiguity of two inwardnesses, becomes in melancholia a sharp division between accuser and accused, persecutor and persecuted, judge and the one found guilty. Levinas states, “The psyche is the form of a peculiar dephasing, a loosening up or unclamping of identity: the same prevented from coinciding with itself [...]. It is not an abdication of the same...but an abnegation of oneself fully responsible for the other.”<sup>297</sup> The “oneself” has come “to the point of explosion or fission.”<sup>298</sup> What once coincided is now split and it is the guilt or being responsible for the other’s death that brings about “a special agency,” that is, the lost-object in the form of a pathological conscience, that both accuses and judges the now emaciated ego.<sup>299</sup> The ego, “contested in [its] own identity,” has become “hunted down...in [its] home.”<sup>300</sup> The ego exists now as pure vulnerability and an endless “exposure to wounds” that it inflicts upon itself.<sup>301</sup> Freud elaborates on this melancholic splitting, stating:

The object-relation [to the loved person] was shattered. The result was not the normal one of withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one, but something different, for whose coming about various conditions seem to be necessary. The [loved] object-cathexis...was brought to an end. But the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego [...]. Thus, the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way, an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the [introjected] loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego [...].<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>299</sup> Freud, MM, p. 25.

<sup>300</sup> Levinas, OTB, p. 92.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., p 105.

<sup>302</sup> Freud, MM, p. 25.

From this, Freud continues, “we can see how in him [the melancholic] one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it [the ego] as its object.”<sup>303</sup> Freud concludes, “that the critical agency which is here split off...is the agency commonly called ‘conscience’... [which has] become diseased.”<sup>304</sup> The unrelenting guilt inherent in melancholia is the ground from which the pathological conscience takes root and grows. The substituted object in the mind now acquires agency and takes the guilty ego as its object to punish; the ego surrendering to this guilt is ready to be sacrificed to atone for its sins.<sup>305</sup> The other within the same *qua* pathological conscience is, in my reading of Levinas, the manifestation of the self which he describes as “out of phase with itself...forgetful in biting in upon itself, in the reference to itself which is the gnawing away at oneself of remorse.”<sup>306</sup> Remorse or *remorse of conscience* can mean an attack of paralyzing regret for doing something morally wrong due to a consciousness of guilt.<sup>307</sup> Its etymological root consists of the Latin *remordēre*, which means “to bite back, to persistently gnaw.”<sup>308</sup> Levinas circles back to remorse to emphasize, once again, that “the self-accusation of remorse gnaws away at the closed and firm core of consciousness, opening it, fissioning it.”<sup>309</sup>

Guilt, at the center of it all, is the highly explosive substance within the self and pathological conscience is the incendiary. Freud writes that “the melancholic displays something...which is *lacking* in [healthy] mourning—an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard” that materializes “in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Cf. Simon Critchley, *How to Stop Living and Start Worrying*, op. cit., p. 41. He states, “In abnormal mourning [melancholia] I don’t just get over the other’s death; the other’s death takes flight into my ego, sure, but it takes flight in a way that haunts and divides that ego in a way that leaves it troubled.”

<sup>306</sup> Levinas, OTB, p. 115.

<sup>307</sup> “remorse, n.” OED online. [www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/162286](http://www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/162286).

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> Levinas, OTB, p. 125.

expectation of punishment.”<sup>310</sup> These self-reproaches, Freud adds, ensue from the pathological mourner who believes that “he himself is to blame for the loss of the loved object, i.e. that he has willed it.”<sup>311</sup> Ultimately, the self-torment of conscience caused by guilt expresses a dangerous “satisfaction of...sadism and hate.”<sup>312</sup> For the melancholic there is an agonizing *double loss* in that—first—the real loved one is irreparably lost to the world making the world emptier and poorer, which then—secondly—initiates the work of melancholia that results in the attempt to punish and destroy the self because of its unrelenting guilt over causing—proximately or remotely—the traumatic loss of the beloved. The melancholic balances the double loss that they have *caused* with a double murder that they *deserve*: who they thought they were (innocent, good, loving and loved) has been killed and who they have become (guilty, bad, hating and hated) must die because they have *killed the thing they love*.<sup>313</sup> The job of the pathological conscience is to carry out a death sentence to the ego that is guilty of murder. For the melancholic, suicide is homicide. Freud concludes:

This picture of a delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority is completed by sleeplessness...and what is psychologically very remarkable—by an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life. [...] It is this sadism alone that solves the riddle of the tendency to suicide, which makes melancholia so interesting—and so *dangerous*. [...] The analysis of melancholia now shows that the ego can kill itself only if...it can treat itself as an object [...].<sup>314</sup>

What Freud benignly calls sleeplessness, Levinas rightly goes further using the terms “fatigue” and “insomnia,” which he describes as the “absolute impossibility to slip away” from oneself,

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<sup>310</sup> Freud, MM, pp. 20 and 22.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> See Oscar Wilde, *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 323.

<sup>314</sup> Freud, MM, pp. 22 and 28.

to escape the condemnation of conscience.<sup>315</sup> The mind's ability to subdivide and crucify itself manifests in the phenomenon of the melancholic speaking to themselves in the second and third persons. Critchley provides an example of what that might look like when he, speaking from the point of view of the pathological mourner talking to himself as other, as object, says "I want to kill that disgusting piece of shit that doesn't deserve to live; it's *that* creature that has to die."<sup>316</sup>

If suicide is the tragic telos of melancholia, then what makes guilt the genesis of this form of self-destruction? Levinas provides an important corrective to Freud's assessment of guilt's scope and reach. Freud writes, "He [the melancholic] abases himself before everyone...[he] extends his self-criticism back over the past; he declares that he was never any better."<sup>317</sup> The melancholic arrives at the conclusion that they are not guilty of just one crime; instead, they realize that they have been fundamentally flawed and guilty from the time they took their first breath. Freud thus establishes that the melancholic regards guilt as an essential part of their identity, that the source of this form of guilt is being responsible for the real loved other's death, and that this form of guilt is "crushing" for the melancholic.<sup>318</sup>

But what makes this form of guilt so crushing? One of Levinas' more striking assertions regarding guilt provides a new way to think about this psychoanalytic concept. In Levinas' interview with François Poirié, when asked what led him to philosophy he answered, "above

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<sup>315</sup> Levinas, OTB, pp. 54 and 93. Among its many manifestations, Blanchot calls *the disaster* a "strangled sleep." *The Writing of the Disaster*, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>316</sup> Critchley, *Stop Living and Start Worrying*, op. cit., p. 50. I think it is also worth mentioning that this punishing "dysfunctional self-talk is also found in patients suffering from severe eating disorders like anorexia nervosa, which has been shown to have a devastating impact on psychosocial functioning." Ned Scott, et. al., "Dysfunctional self-talk associated with eating disorder severity and symptomatology," *Journal of Eating Disorders*, vol. 2:14, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2050-2794-2-14>.

<sup>317</sup> Freud, MM, p. 22.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., pp. 24 and 27.

all Dostoevsky.” In Levinas’ collection of interviews titled, *Is it Righteous to Be?*,<sup>319</sup> he quotes the very same line from Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*<sup>320</sup> eight times throughout the book. The line that he reiterates over and over states: “We are all guilty, the one toward another, and I more than all the others.”<sup>321</sup> Echoing this line, Levinas writes in his chapter on substitution that “the self is a sub-jectum; it is under the weight of the universe, *responsible for everything*.”<sup>322</sup> Keeping with our interpretation of Levinas’ text as a discourse on pathological mourning, we can read these statements as expressing the proper scope and reach of melancholia in a more accurate way than Freud’s first formulation. Focusing on the substitute other as mirroring the loved person who died, the melancholic feels that they are the *guiltiest* of anyone for causing this death, which puts the blame squarely on their shoulders. Because in some sense the lost love-object was their whole world, there is a feeling that the whole universe is crashing down and crushing them. This guilt reaches its zenith of pain when the melancholic starts to believe that this remorseful “‘me’ is the exclusion from the possibility of comparison.”<sup>323</sup> In other words, they come to believe that they are (and always were) *solely* and *totally* responsible for everything that caused the loved one to die. Because they are guilty through and through and claim full responsibility for the first loss of the real other, they believe themselves to be a perennial danger to the resurrected lost object as well, which will inevitably result in killing the loved one again, killing them twice. Thus, the melancholic believes that in order for the loved other to live, to be protected from the harm it causes, they must be offered

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<sup>319</sup> Levinas, RTB, pp. 56, 72, 100, 112, 133, 161, 169, and 229.

<sup>320</sup> Dostoevsky, op. cit., p. 298.

<sup>321</sup> Levinas, RTB, p. 112. The Pevear translation of this line reads, “Mother, heart of my heart, truly each of us is *guilty* [ВИНОВАТ / *vinovat*] before everyone and for everyone, only people do not know it [...]. Indeed, I am perhaps the most *guilty* [ВИНОВНЕЕ / *vinovneye*] of all, and the worst of all men in the world as well! Dostoevsky, op. cit., p. 298. See also, *Langenscheidt’s Russian-English English-Russian Dictionary*, ed. Langenscheidt editorial staff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), p. 415.

<sup>322</sup> Levinas, OTB, p. 116. Italics mine.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

as a sacrifice. The following statement by Levinas can be read as congruous with this aspect of pathological mourning: “The subjectivity of substitution of the self is the suffering of suffering, the ultimate offering of oneself, of suffering in the offering of oneself.”<sup>324</sup> The purpose of this self-sacrifice is to atone for its wrongdoing and to secure blessings for the other, the lost-object. Thus, Levinas’ attempt to understand “the self as an expiation” takes on new meaning in the context of pathological mourning.<sup>325</sup>

The melancholic delusion of total responsibility for the other also helps to illuminate one of Levinas’ most controversial claims. In “Substitution,” Levinas writes that the self that suffers “a deafening trauma” and has its “thread of consciousness” cut, experiences “the passivity of persecution.”<sup>326</sup> But he makes a further distinction regarding passivity stating, “passivity deserves the epithet of complete or absolute only if the persecuted one is liable to answer for the persecutor.”<sup>327</sup> Later in the chapter Levinas states, “When this relation [of self to the substituted other] is really thought through, it signifies the wound that cannot heal over of the self...accused by the other to the point of persecution, and responsible for its persecutor.”<sup>328</sup> It is clear this idea is central to Levinas’ thinking about the other within the same as it also appears in an earlier version of “Substitution” published six years prior to *Otherwise Than Being*. There he states, “The self bears the weight of the world; it is responsible for everyone. [...] [It is] absolutely responsible for the persecution [it] undergo[es].”<sup>329</sup> In the context of pathological mourning, this puzzling assertion takes on a clear meaning. The narcissistic self establishes the introjected lost-object that devolves into the punishing conscience, which then functions as persecutor of the guilty self. Of course, behind this self-

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>329</sup> Levinas, BPW, p. 90.

delusion is the fact that both persecutor and persecuted are fused in one person, the melancholic. In this way, the persecuted self is responsible for its persecutor. This kind of Levinasian absolute guilt that is both unbridled and catastrophic provides an important lens through which to understand the guilt inherent in melancholia.

### 3.4 Ambivalence and Abraham

Given these extreme responsibilities and punishments, at the core of the melancholic experience is a feeling of ambivalence to both the love-object and its phantasm, the introjected lost-object. Freud observes, “we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object, which have been shifted away from it on to the patient’s own ego.”<sup>330</sup> He goes on to claim that “*everything* derogatory that they say about themselves is at bottom said about someone else.”<sup>331</sup> This ambivalence is like a futile “revolt” against the love- and lost-objects that gets put down in the “crushed state of melancholia.”<sup>332</sup> Though Levinas does not explore the aspect of hate involved in the encounter with the other, it is easy to infer that the experience is excruciating and that it would be natural to resent and despise the other that causes so much pain. Levinas writes, “To be oneself...is to bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me. To be oneself, the state of being a hostage, is always to have...the responsibility for the responsibility for the other.”<sup>333</sup> With melancholia, given that the loved one has died, and their death has caused so much disorientation, loneliness,

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<sup>330</sup> Freud, MM, p. 24.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid. Italics mine.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Levinas, OTB, p. 117.

and pain, to experience hatred toward the other co-exists within the hyper-cathexis of love. And the same thing can be said about the illusory lost-object that accuses, persecutes, punishes, and haunts every thought and feeling of the pathological mourner. When this ambivalence is acknowledged by the melancholic, there is a fresh upsurge of guilt for betraying the love- and lost-objects with its hostility and hatred. One thing that this ambivalence signifies is how we are implicated in each other's hurt, how there are shards of our shattered selves embedded in each other's wounds.

With this in mind, it is possible to re-interpret Levinas' assessment of the importance of Abraham's actions in the Akedah. Levinas states:

[T]he highest point of the whole drama may be the moment when Abraham paused and listened to the voice that would lead him back to the ethical order by commanding him not to commit a human sacrifice. That he should have been prepared to obey is of course astonishing enough; but the crucial point is that he could distance himself from his obedience sufficiently to be able to hear the second voice as well.<sup>334</sup>

In terms of the ambivalence in melancholia, the fact the Abraham was willing to kill Isaac, now a symbol of the lost-object, in such a horrifying way shows the extent of the hatred and resentment he harbors for it. The second voice that interrupts this violence and stays his hand, symbolizes his love reemerging for the lost-object and realization of what he is doing—destroying the thing he has been desperately trying to keep alive.

The setting of this encounter is a remote mountain top where no one dwells, which is an apt metaphor for the topography of annihilatory sadness. Moriah, the name of the mountainous strip of land between Mount Zion and the Mount of Olives, contains a polysemy that cannot be settled amongst interpreters. Harris focuses on two possible meanings of Moriah: the first is the

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<sup>334</sup> Levinas, "Existence and Ethics," *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998). pp. 34-35.

*land of teaching* and the second is *the place where God is worshipped*.<sup>335</sup> It is possible to tie these meanings back to pathological mourning. In terms of teaching, Abraham learns more about himself as he reaches the zenith of his ambivalence and realizes he is capable of protecting and murdering what he has already lost but cannot let go of.

As readers of the Akedah, we learn the extent of Abraham's psychological double-bind: to kill the hate-worthy lost-object is to kill himself, to obey the lost-object-cum-punishing conscience and let it live is to let himself slowly die. Circling back to the idea that the Akedah contains within it an embryonic form of genocide, we learn of Abraham's sole responsibility for the others' non-existence, even if we cannot comprehend it. It is as if an entire world is balanced on the edge of Abraham's knife. This theme of total annihilation of a world is never mentioned explicitly in Genesis 22, but I would argue the idea lives between every line of the Akedah. From the standpoint of melancholia, this theme serves as a symbol for the total impoverishment of the pathological mourner's world and sense of self. The Talmud states that human beings were created especially for the purpose of teaching an essential truth: whoever kills one life kills the world entire.<sup>336</sup> In the context of pathological mourning, this truth is commensurate with the melancholic's experience.

Regarding the second translation of Moriah as *the place where God is worshiped*, it is helpful to think of the word God in its metaphoricity. In one sense, God is a metaphor for what we find ourselves completely devoted to. In pathological mourning, the god-like figure at the center of the melancholic's obsessive devotion is the lost-object, which is their ultimate concern.<sup>337</sup> Rodin's sculpture *The Eternal Idol* can be interpreted as a visual counterpart to this kind of hyper-cathexis (see Artwork 2). Fittingly, the composition of the sculpture is comprised

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<sup>335</sup> R. Harris, "Examining the Word Moriah," *JTS Torah online*, 2006. [www.jtsa.edu](http://www.jtsa.edu).

<sup>336</sup> *Jerusalem Talmud*, Sanhedrin 4:1 (22a). [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/tractate-sanhedrin-chapter-4](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/tractate-sanhedrin-chapter-4).

<sup>337</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 1-3.

of two figures that were reappropriated from Rodin's earlier work, *The Gates of Hell*, which is itself a depiction of a central image from Dante's *Inferno*. In Dante's text, the following message is inscribed upon the gates: *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.*<sup>338</sup> *The Eternal Idol* can be interpreted as a warning to those who would turn their beloved (alive or dead) into an object of worship, which can become all-consuming and bring a person to their knees. Like a god, the lost-object requires a kind of continuous worship while doling out harsh judgments for the guilty, which in its own way brings the melancholic to their knees. Dante's text is illustrative of the double-bind of the melancholic, who, with no way out, eventually loses all hope that the love-object can be restored or their guilt assuaged. In the Akedah, Abraham's devotion to Sarah and Isaac transforms into betrayal. His choices cause them to become lost. How long did he linger on that mountain? Did he ever truly come down? In a moment of hopelessness did he consider taking the knife to slit his own throat?

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Artwork 2

Auguste Rodin, *The Eternal Idol*, circa 1890-93

Plaster, H. 73.2 cm, W. 59.2 cm, D. 41.1 cm

The Rodin Museum, Paris, France

Public Domain

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<sup>338</sup> Dante, op. cit., p. 22.



The way guilt increases for the melancholic combined with their experience of arrested time might be likened to a room flooding with rising water and the person inside is paralyzed and cannot swim. For the healthy mourner, they slowly return to time's flow and begin again to last through time, which is a return to the diachronic movement of the time within the self. When Levinas writes of "diachrony" in *Otherwise Than Being*, it is analogous, on my reading, to the relationship of the lost-object to the real object. The lost-object, though it seems to be the re-instantiation of the love-object, and is even called by the same name, is in reality its dark inverse. The diachrony in "Substitution" is not a "lasting through time" but a *withering in the absence of time's flow*. Levinas writes, "there must be signaled a lapse of time that does not return, a diachrony refractory to all synchronization."<sup>339</sup> He describes the diachronic state as "that which makes this departure" from time's flow linear direction.<sup>340</sup> And finally he writes, "In self-consciousness there is...senescence. It is as senescence beyond recuperation of memory that time, lost time that does not return, is a diachrony, and concerns me."<sup>341</sup> This aging or withering under the reign of the lost-object leads to lost time, arrested time. The melancholic is bound to a past when the love-object was still alive, but his memory is corrupted by unbridled guilt. Their sole focus on the past and the suffering of punishment in an unending present ("of which the present is *incapable*") causes a disjuncture with the future that never arrives.<sup>342</sup> The fact that Levinas connects diachrony to the "infinite" takes on new meaning in the context of melancholia and provides yet another layer to the meaning of Moriah. The work of the infinite in relation to the divided self indicates the seemingly *infinite debt* the self has accrued in its hyper-cathexis to the lost-object. Since the love-object is really dead and cannot give its pardon

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

or cancel the debt, the debt is “irreversible.”<sup>343</sup> As Levinas states, “the disqualification of the apology is the very characteristic of persecution [...]”<sup>344</sup> He concludes stating, “the more I approach [the other] with which I am encharged the further away I am. This debit which increases is infinity [...]”<sup>345</sup> The unbridled guilt at the core of melancholia only fuels the punishing conscience to perpetually take its pound of flesh from the self who is forever in default and endlessly responsible. It is in this context Levinas writes something that fits squarely with my approach of reading his concept of substitution through the lens of melancholia. The diachronic, Levinas notes, is proximity to the other within the same, which is a profound “sadness.”<sup>346</sup> Melancholia is an annihilatory sadness that stops time and stops the heart, it is an “impotence without healing,” it is “the thorn in the flesh of reason, which is the shudder of subjectivity,” it is “violence *par excellence*...without the possibility of apology.”<sup>347</sup>

In this vein, one can read the following statement from Levinas in a new light indicating the ambivalence at the core of the relationship to the lost-object: “Belief [in the lost-object] stands in the midst of this conflict between presence [of love] and absence [of love]—a conflict which remains forever irreconcilable, an open wound, unstaunchable bleeding.”<sup>348</sup> As Abraham is impossibly divided between his love of God and his love for Sarah and Isaac, it is possible that he resents them all for making him have to choose. The melancholic, too, is divided between their love and hate for the lost-object and resentful of a reality that makes them choose between relenting to and living with absence or dying under the tyranny of an unrelenting presence.

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>344</sup> Levinas, BPW, p. 93.

<sup>345</sup> Levinas, OTB, p. 93.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., pp. 93 and 127.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., p. 84 and BPW, p. 183.

<sup>348</sup> Levinas, “Existence and Ethics,” op. cit., p. 27.

### 3.5 The Death of Narcissus

What type of relationship can a narcissist have with another? The obvious answer would seem to be none. But that would be to make the mistake of assuming the narcissist is only in love with himself. According to Ovid's telling of the myth of Narcissus, it is precisely this type of all-consuming self-love that is the telos of the boy's tragic transformation into a symbol of death and perennial admonishment.<sup>349</sup> For Ovid, Narcissus has a history of withholding himself from others. Being beautiful, he attracts the attention of many admirers, but despite the opportunities to enter into a relationship he never does.<sup>350</sup> There is what might be termed an a-cathexis, that is, a total aversion to human connection. It has been argued that this condition was caused by the attribute of "pride" (*hubris*), which in this context seems to mean something like a simultaneous overestimation of one's own worth and a premature negative judgment of the worth of others.<sup>351</sup> It might be equally plausible that this lack of cathectic desire is rooted in a growing awareness that to love another person is to learn something essential about yourself and he cannot afford to do this. Hanging over the story like a dark cloud is the prophetic pronouncement from the seer Tiresias regarding the fate of Narcissus: if he does not come to know himself, then he will live.<sup>352</sup> The implication of this prophetic statement is that if Narcissus *does* come to know himself through the love of another then he will surely die.

Another aspect of Narcissus' a-cathexis might spring from a transgenerational trauma that has come to color his whole understanding of interpersonal relationships. Narcissus' mother Liriope was raped by the river God Cephissus and Narcissus himself was conceived from

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<sup>349</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, trans. Horace Gregory (New York: Signet Classics, 2009), pp. 72-77. See also Henri de Riedmatten, "The Sources of Narcissism" in *Narcissus in Troubled Waters: Francis Bacon, Bill Viola, and Jeff Wall* (Rome, Italy: L'erma di Bretschneider, 2014). pp. 21-28.

<sup>350</sup> Ovid, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>351</sup> Riedmatten, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>352</sup> Ovid, op. cit., p. 72.

this act of sexual violence.<sup>353</sup> His so-called strange passion (*novitasque furoris*) to keep his love to himself and his harsh reaction to Echo's touch ("may I be dead before you throw your fearful chains around me")<sup>354</sup> may be rooted in a radical distrust of human desire and the vulnerability of intimacy.<sup>355</sup> The fact that his mother's rapist is a god of water foreshadows the danger he will face at the end of the story as he encounters his reflection in a forest stream.

Up to this point in the story, nobody has earned the right to touch Narcissus or even begin to enter his cathectic orbit. But while hunting in the forest he chances upon a pristine spring. When he lowers himself to get a drink, he catches sight of his reflection in the surface of the water. Narcissus believes his reflection to be the image of another person entirely.<sup>356</sup> This is the point in the story that arrives at the "stage of the other," which is a transitional stage between Narcissus' previous a-cathexis and his ultimate melancholic hyper-cathexis.<sup>357</sup> This point in the story clearly reveals the full horror of Narcissus' "curse,"<sup>358</sup> namely that he does not recognize himself, which culminates in the punishing fact "that he has been doomed to a passion and thirst that he will never be able to assuage."<sup>359</sup> This could also be a description of melancholia where the terror of loving an unreachable other brings the self to the point of annihilation.

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<sup>353</sup> Ovid, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>355</sup> As Riedmatten summarizes, "Echo, the nymph who can only repeat a sound, sees the handsome young Narcissus chasing the frightened deer, and she instantly falls in love with him. [...] But she cannot speak first, therefore she listens out for a sound which might allow her to return her own words." Riedmatten, op. cit., pp. 23-24. Narcissus, now cut off from his fellow hunters, calls out to see if anyone is *here* and commands that the group reconvene *together*, but all he hears is Echo echoing the words "here" and "together" back to him. Echo then reveals herself and attempts to touch Narcissus, but he pulls violently away and shouts his bitter screed. Ovid, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>356</sup> Ovid, op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>357</sup> Riedmatten, op. cit., p. 26-27

<sup>358</sup> Ovid, op. cit., p. 75.

<sup>359</sup> Pierre Hadot, "Le mythe de Narcisse et son interprétation par Plotin," quoted in Riedmatten, op. cit., p. 26.

Ovid interjects in the story to both chastise Narcissus and to explain the fate of his misplaced love. He states: “Why try to grasp at shadows in their flight? What he tried to hold resided nowhere...his love was cursed.”<sup>360</sup> Earlier Ovid had commented that Narcissus confused a shadow containing his own image as someone else’s body.<sup>361</sup> There is some textual uncertainty regarding the correct word in Ovid’s poem surrounding this detail, with some translators choosing wave (*unda*) and some shadow (*umbra*).<sup>362</sup> Fittingly, a shadow-wave is an apt analogy for the introjected object itself—for what crashes into the pathological mourner is something like a shadow ripped from the loved one at their death to drown the one who will not let it go. This is the fate of the melancholic’s misplaced love.

But this is not quite so in Ovid’s version of the myth. For Ovid, the so-called “other” is not another person and, most importantly, it *never was* another person. It has always been Narcissus alone at the water’s edge. Who he sees is himself, which he eventually recognizes.<sup>363</sup> If there is a cathexis it is only with an image of himself from start to finish. For a time, he was confused and sad, but not melancholic; his love proved to be self-centered, but not narcissistic in the psychoanalytic sense of the term.

In Pausanias there is an alternative to Ovid’s version of the myth of Narcissus.<sup>364</sup> In Pausanias’ version of the story, Narcissus is said to have had a twin sister whom he loved deeply, but she dies suddenly and unexpectedly.<sup>365</sup> It is this crucial difference in the story that makes the encounter with his reflection a wholly different experience. Though Pausanias does not say, we can imagine that Narcissus felt guilt at his sister’s death because he failed to keep

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<sup>360</sup> Ovid, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74

<sup>362</sup> Riedmatten, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26. Ovid, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>364</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece, Books 8.22-10*, trans. W.H.S. Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), p. 311.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*

her alive. In the aftermath of this traumatic loss, Narcissus “would go to the spring...finding some relief for his love in imagining that he saw, not his own reflection, but the likeness of his sister.”<sup>366</sup> At this point, Pausanias breaks off the story. Even so, seeing the story through the lens of melancholia, one can imagine Narcissus lingering by the water’s edge fixated on the phantom of his sister’s visage believing he sees her alive again and that *he* is keeping her alive (see Artwork 3). To sustain this pseudo-resurrection, he must stay with her. As time goes on, one can imagine Narcissus slowly wilting beside the spring and dying from starvation. Or perhaps Narcissus enters the spring to unite with his loved one, which results with him endlessly searching for someone who is not there till he drowns. Riley provides a fitting description when she writes:

For if timelessness is the time of the dead, then you will go with them into their timelessness. [...] You’re fused with the dead, as if to animate them. They draw you across to their side, while you incorporate them to your side.<sup>367</sup>

Narcissus loses time as he kneels beside the spring. In agony, he goes to his loved one to try to bring her back to life. He is drawn to her image as he enters the water. Perhaps he swallows the water in an attempt to touch her. Saving her is killing him.

Page 115  
Artwork 3  
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Narcissus*, 1594-96  
Oil on canvas, height: 110 cm × 92 cm (43 in × 36 in);  
Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Rome, Italy  
Public Domain

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> Riley, op. cit., p. 95.



Interpreted through a psychoanalytic lens, this version of the Narcissus story becomes an allegory for the experience of melancholia. Poignantly, Narcissus suffers from the pathology that now bears his name. The condition of narcissistic melancholia unfolds before the reader's eyes: the deep love, the traumatic loss of that love, the guilt over causing the loss, the substitution of the introjected image for the beloved that he does not recognize is a part of himself, and the sacrifice of his future to atone for his failures.

What follows is an original poem (collected in Chapter 6) inspired by Pausanias' retelling of the myth of Narcissus. The poem is an extended metaphor of pathological mourning. The relationship between philosophy and poetry that is prominent in the poem will be revisited in Chapter 5.

Poetry, like philosophy, begins in wonder:  
An astonishment of words.

In the myth of Narcissus, the boy's twin sister  
Dies. Later, when he catches sight

Of his image in the river, he looks lovingly  
At himself thinking it is her.

He forgets his own face. He forgets  
His own voice thinking it is her voice.

He approaches her open face, while his own  
Is thin skin stretched over a vacancy.

He takes her image inside himself  
So they both can live again.

She speaks: *my death is all your fault, Narcissus.*  
*Stop writing now. Stop everything. You owe me this.*

Philosophy, like poetry, pays attention  
To language: thinking itself to death.

Every word is a drowned lung  
That makes no sound.

He puts his face underwater  
To hear her better.

The body sobs, water seeps into his dreams,  
The future is neatly guillotined.

When the I is finally gone, so is the image  
That kept her from vanishing.

Philosophy knows not what it does.  
Poetry is yet another flawed act of love.

## CHAPTER FOUR | MANIA AND MELANCHOLIA II

To enchant vulgar reality.<sup>368</sup>

—Guillaume Apollinaire

### 4.1 Mania's Power

If the previous chapter provided an explication of melancholia, it will be necessary to keep it in mind for the discussion of mania that follows here. As Freud notes, “The most remarkable characteristic of melancholia, and the one in most need of explanation, is its tendency to change round into mania—a state which is the opposite of it in its symptoms.”<sup>369</sup> Mania and melancholia are so intimately intertwined that they feed off each other, the one influencing the other. Freud comments that they might be characterized together as a “circular insanity.”<sup>370</sup> Despite the fact that the landscape and trajectory of melancholia becomes so annihilatory, it is in its inception a denial of loss and a simultaneous act of self-preservation from the pain of that loss. The real love-object's death is denied, and the substitute lost-object is affirmed. When the guilt that disfigures the lost-object into a pathological, persecutory conscience, the suffering ego comes closer and closer to self-destruction. When the melancholic self reaches a point of unbearable pain, the switch from melancholia into mania becomes possible. The “large expenditure of psychical energy” that kept the persecuted self “bound” within a ceaseless melancholia, is suddenly now free and available.<sup>371</sup> From the manic perspective, this newly

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<sup>368</sup> “Enchanter la vulgaire réalité,” quoted by Dana Gioia in “Poetry as Enchantment,” *New Pilgrimages: Selected Papers from the IAUPE Beijing Conference in 2013* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2015), p. 24.

<sup>369</sup> Freud, MM, p. 29.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

freed energy manifests in the grandiosity of the self, an exaggerated sense of self-esteem, and a joyful feeling that anything is possible.<sup>372</sup>

If melancholia is denial of the death of the loved one, then mania is the denial of the death of the loved one *and* the denial of guilt over causing that death. It is at a double remove from the source of pain and suffering. To undo the catastrophic loss and reverse the guilt that burns the self up from within, mania works like a flood that is powerful yet ultimately uncontrollable. In this way, mania is a forceful flight from reality toward illusory ecstatic experiences and beatific visions.<sup>373</sup> Despite being delusional and ultimately harmful, mania is an experience of self-preservation that sometimes allows a person to function and, in some cases, briefly flourish before they revert back to melancholia.<sup>374</sup>

The central characteristic of mania that allows the above processes to do their work is a personal feeling of *omnipotence* in the pathological mourner. This feeling of being all-powerful undergirds the manic's new orientation and outlook. They feel they can do anything, for example, they think it is possible to resurrect the dead and to do no wrong. This manic state of mind produces the sense of triumph over melancholic despair.<sup>375</sup> Melanie Klein summarizes the condition stating, "The ego is driven by depressive anxieties...to build up omnipotent and violent phantasies...in order to save and restore the [lost] loved ones."<sup>376</sup>

These aspects of mania can be seen at work in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. In what follows, I will read Kierkegaard's text and the biblical text it is parasitic of as a form of fiction thereby bracketing out the question of the nature and purpose of religious faith the text

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<sup>372</sup> *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5*, op. cit., p. 124.

<sup>373</sup> Frederick Goodwin and Kay Redfield Jamison, *Manic-Depressive Illness*, Volume I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 59.

<sup>374</sup> Jamison, *Touched with Fire*, op. cit., pp. 102-147.

<sup>375</sup> Freud, MM, p. 30.

<sup>376</sup> Melanie Klein, "The Depressive Position," *The Nature of Melancholy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 302.

is primarily concerned with extrapolating.<sup>377</sup> I will approach this text as a work of literary art whose primary function is to provide a creative vehicle for self-examination—in this case, the examination of a manic self in distress—thus reading the text against the grain of its overt goals. To this end, I will first examine an explicit instance of mania in *Fear and Trembling* followed by an exploration of a textual blind spot that, I will argue, contains buried clues about the experience of mania and allows the reader to see the text in a new light.

Ostensibly a study of genuine religious faith and the exemplar of that faith, Abraham, *Fear and Trembling* attempts to get inside the mind of Abraham, granting imaginative access to his hitherto unknown interior life. Kierkegaard, through his pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, emphasizes Abraham's inability to communicate to his son Isaac, his wife Sarah, and his tribal community, the reasons why he feels compelled to obey a divine voice only he can hear telling him to sacrifice his son and nullify God's covenant promise.<sup>378</sup> The anguish of his apartness is acutely felt in the Kierkegaardian narrative.

The explicit instance of mania happens relatively early in *Fear and Trembling*. It must be noted at the outset that *Fear and Trembling* plays a part in Kierkegaard's larger project of re-conceptualizing and proselytizing, in his view, a more accurate understanding of the requirements of becoming a Christian.<sup>379</sup> According to Ettore Rocca, one way Kierkegaard does this in *Fear and Trembling* is by portraying Abraham as the embodiment of an embryonic form of the "Christological problem" that only Christ himself can solve.<sup>380</sup> For Rocca, the crux of the problem is that Abraham, as the recipient of God's covenant promise, stands in an "absolute relation to the absolute," which in Rocca's interpretation means he is paradoxically both a

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<sup>377</sup> Kierkegaard, FT.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>379</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 46-47 and 56.

<sup>380</sup> E. Rocca, "If Abraham is not a Human Being," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* ed. Niels Jorgen Cappelorn, et. al. (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter Publishing, 2002), pp. 247-58.

human being and *not* a human being at the same time.<sup>381</sup> Rocca cites the following decisive passage from *Fear and Trembling* to illustrate this connection between Abraham's paradoxical nature and Christ's:

If one looks a little closer I doubt very much whether one will find in the whole world a single analogy [to Abraham], except a later one [Jesus Christ] that proves nothing, for the fact remains that Abraham represents faith, and that faith finds its proper expression in him [Jesus Christ] whose life is not only the most paradoxical conceivable, but so paradoxical that it simply cannot be thought.<sup>382</sup>

What makes Jesus Christ the ultimate paradox for Kierkegaard that crucifies human understanding is the fact that he is both a finite human being and an infinite God at the same time. In *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes is comparing Jesus to Abraham and not the other way around. For Rocca, it is clear the shared attribute that circulates between them is this paradox.<sup>383</sup> For my interpretation, what this establishes is that Abraham—as predecessor to the paradoxical figure of Christ—represents a human being who believes himself to be in a special relationship with the divine that in turn makes him divine-like. In other words, Abraham feels *omnipotent* in the face of traumatic loss and overwhelming guilt, which is a central symptom of mania.<sup>384</sup>

In the Kierkegaardian retelling of the Akedah, Abraham's manic omnipotence comes to the surface within the motif of death and resurrection.<sup>385</sup> Silentio imagines that Abraham spilt Isaac's blood, killing and burning him on the altar. Then, in the very next moment, Isaac is resurrected and fully restored *in this life*. The point in *Fear and Trembling* where this vision of Abraham and Isaac fully materializes is in the "Preamble of the Heart."<sup>386</sup> Silentio states:

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<sup>381</sup> Kierkegaard, FT, p. 85.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Rocca, op. cit., p. 253.

<sup>384</sup> Freud, MM, p. 30-31.; DSM-5, op. cit., p. 124.; Goodwin and Jamison, op. cit., pp. 58-59.; Klein, op. cit., p. 302.

<sup>385</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 196-198.

<sup>386</sup> Kierkegaard, FT, pp. 57-82.

Let us go further. We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham had faith. His faith was not that he should be happy sometime in the hereafter, but that he should find blessed happiness *here in this world*. God could give him a new Isaac, bring the sacrificial offer back to life...to be able to lose one's understanding and with it the whole of the finite world whose stockbroker it is, and then on the strength of the absurd get exactly the same finitude back again, that leaves me aghast. But I don't say on that account that it is of little worth; on the contrary it is the *one and only marvel*.<sup>387</sup>

Reading this passage through the lens of the concept of mania, phrases like *blessed happiness here in this world, give him a new Isaac...bring the sacrificial offer back to life, and to lose one's understanding*, hint at a state of mind straining under the weight of grief and guilt towards a giddy triumph that would be impossible for anyone else. In this manic state, Abraham himself is the saving god who wrestles with death. The melancholic experiences loss as an implosion. In mania, the pathological mourner becomes a "master" of death and "pushes it aside."<sup>388</sup>

In the Akedah, Abraham suffers a traumatic two-fold loss: his favored son Isaac and the trust of his wife Sarah. Abraham is directly responsible for these losses: he kills Isaac and betrays Sarah. His family is irredeemably torn apart. The guilt underlying this traumatic scene is the catalyst for a descent into melancholia. But somehow in the end Abraham restores his losses. He triumphantly brings Isaac back to life and spares Sarah the anguish of outliving her child. None of this is real, of course. He exists in the realm of denial and delusion. In this interpretation, Abraham is not the exemplar of faith but the paradigm of mania.

One way to make sense of this desolation in the context of the Akedah is to interpret it through the literary device of *the double*. As Robert Rogers states, "When an author wishes to depict mental conflict within a single mind, a way to dramatize it is to represent the mind by two or more characters."<sup>389</sup> In this way, we can see the characters in the story (God, Isaac, and

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<sup>387</sup> Kierkegaard, FT, p. 67. Italics mine.

<sup>388</sup> Freud, MM, p. 30.

<sup>389</sup> Robert Rogers, *The Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), p. 29.

Sarah), as doubles of Abraham himself—pieces of his own mind at war with themselves. This becomes an apt analogy for thinking through the actions of the pathologically split self. Ultimately, Abraham “disavow[s] reality...makes [himself] believe that there is no reason for fear, so that [he] may retain the satisfaction”<sup>390</sup> of saving the boy, saving the world, and saving himself from the guilt of losing both—a happy ending that only mania can provide.<sup>391</sup> But in actuality he remains alone with the knife in his hand. This is a solipsism with many faces, a gem-cut solipsism masquerading as a tale containing a chorus of characters. One can imagine the omnipotent Abraham talking to himself, the lost-object speaking to the hither side of the persecuted self that now plays the role of savior: “I will not abandon you...nor will I let you escape.”<sup>392</sup>

The other instance of mania in *Fear and Trembling* occurs much later in the text where Silentio examines other stories and fables that prove to be similar in some ways to the Akedah but ultimately end up increasing his appreciation of Abraham by putting into relief what he is *not*. An important elision occurs in Silentio’s treatment of the Nordic story of Agnete and the merman in Problema III.<sup>393</sup> Kierkegaard was well acquainted with the story as evidenced in his journals. Yet, strangely, both Silentio and Kierkegaard get the traditional story wrong when they tell it. From this significant misstep Silentio then tells four alternative versions of the story but none of them are remotely like the original folk ballad.

This is even more puzzling when you consider that in 1843 Kierkegaard personally attended a performance of Hans Christian Andersen’s play *Agnete og Havmanden* (*Agnete and*

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<sup>390</sup> Freud, “Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense,” *On Freud’s “Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense,”* eds. Thierry Bokanowski and Sergio Lewkowicz (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>391</sup> It is interesting to note that in several of Levinas’ interviews he makes the point of saying that after the Shoah there can be no more happy endings. Levinas, RTB, p. 134 and 197.

<sup>392</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., pp. 337-338, quoted in Levinas, RTB, p. 164.

<sup>393</sup> Kierkegaard, FT, pp. 109-144.

*the Merman*),<sup>394</sup> which is based on the more traditional telling of the story. In addition, Kierkegaard greatly admired Jens Baggesen's 1808 poem "Agnete fra Holmegaard" ("Agnete from Holmegaard"),<sup>395</sup> which also remains faithful to the original story. Despite these exposures to the full story of Agnete, Kierkegaard elides the vast majority of its details to focus on one small aspect of the story he desires to develop. In a journal entry from 1843, he states:

I have considered treating Agnete and the Merman from an angle that has probably not occurred to any poet. The Merman is a seducer, but after he has won Agnete's love he is so moved that he wants to belong to her entirely.—But, alas, he cannot do so because then he would have to initiate her into the whole of his sorrowful existence, of how he becomes a monster at certain times, etc. The church cannot give them its blessing. Then he despairs and in his despair dives to the bottom of the sea and remains there, but he leads Agnete to believe that he only wanted to deceive her. [...] This is the sort of knot that can only be untied by means of the religious...if the Merman could have faith, then his faith might perhaps transform him into a human being.<sup>396</sup>

Compare this to Silentio's summary of the traditional story in *Fear and Trembling*: "The merman is a seducer who rises up from concealment in the depths, and in wild desire grasps and breaks the innocent flower [Agnete] standing in all its charm by the shore, pensively bending its head to the ocean's roar. This is what the poets have so far made of it."<sup>397</sup> In the journal entry, Kierkegaard has no use for the details of the traditional story and is focused on creating his own version of the story, which is his right. Silentio's version, however, claims to represent what all the poets up to his point in time have written about the story. But many poets and writers, including Baggesen and Andersen, had already published versions of the story that faithfully followed the general outline of the traditional version long before Kierkegaard (via

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<sup>394</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, *Agnete og Havmanden: Dramatisk digt* (Kjøbenhavn: B. Luno & Schneider, 1834).

<sup>395</sup> Jens Baggesen, "Agnete fra Holmegaard," *Nyeste blandede Digte*, Fr. Brummers Forlag, Kbh., 1808, pp. 163–179. "Agnete from Holmegaard," hereafter abbreviated AH.

<sup>396</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks* Volume 2, ed. Bruce H. Kirmmse, et. al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), Journal JJ, pp. 167–168.

<sup>397</sup> Kierkegaard, FT, p. 120.

Silentio) provides his summary in 1843. In short, Silentio's summary waters down, distorts, and reduces the long, complex story of Agnete and the merman to *one inaccurate sentence*. In the original version of the story, the focus is almost exclusively on Agnete and not the merman where Agnete has many additional scenes, dialogue, and character development beyond the so-called beach seduction. In contrast, *Fear and Trembling* pays the vast majority of its attention to the merman and abruptly ends the story before it really gets started, much like stopping a three-act play after the first scene.

The journal entry from 1843 provides a clue as to why Kierkegaard was drawn to this story despite his disregard for its details, namely, his perception of the merman's lack of faith in a time when he was intensely focused on the topic of faith. Interestingly, in an 1840 letter to his new fiancé Regine Olsen he quotes several lines from Baggesen's poem, "Agnete from Holmegaard" (again a more traditional rendering of the story), then goes on to describe his personal identification with the seducing, secretive, but ultimately self-sacrificing merman.<sup>398</sup> In the letter he quotes the following lines from "Agnete from Holmegaard": "He [the merman] stopped her [Agnete's] ears, / He stopped her mouth; / Then he rushed with the beauty / Deep to the bottom of the sea."<sup>399</sup> He then writes the following to Regine:

This more or less is what I have done; for since my real life is not in the external and visible world, but deep down in the secretiveness of the soul (and what metaphor for this is more beautiful and more fitting than the sea), so I know of nothing other than the merman to whom to compare myself; but then also it became necessary. To 'stop her

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<sup>398</sup> Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 495. Cf. Henrik Blicher, "Jens Baggesen: Kierkegaard and His Master's Voice," *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries*, Volume 7, Tome III: Literature, Drama, and Aesthetics, ed. Jon Stewart (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 33-48. Cf. Nathaniel Kramer, "Agnes and the Merman: Abraham as Monster," *Kierkegaard's Literary Figures and Motifs*, Volume 16, Tome I: Agamemnon to Guadalquivir, ed. Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 16-29. 352.

<sup>399</sup> Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 495.

ears and stop her mouth,' as long, that is, as the downward journey lasts, for down there this is not necessary, as one indeed sees from the next verse: 'Mouth upon mouth.'<sup>400</sup>

Some of the central motifs of *Fear and Trembling* are concealment, secrecy, the separateness of persons, incomprehension, and the miracle of bringing the dead back to life. These motifs are important for mania as well. In his letter to Regine, Kierkegaard can be interpreted as poignantly describing the transition from melancholia to mania. When he writes that the beloved's ears and mouth are stopped during the downward journey, this can be read as a poetic statement about the death of the love-object who could not breathe and the guilt for drowning her. But "down there," in the realm of mania, the lost-object can be revived with a loving kiss, mouth on mouth.

These pathological experiences happen in the "secretiveness of the soul" that is not visible to the external world. For Kierkegaard, he will end his engagement to Regine after one year and she will never be a part of his life again—a figurative death in life that continued to haunt Kierkegaard. As if echoing the line from the 1843 journal entry where he wrote that if the merman had had faith then he could have become a real human being, Kierkegaard writes of himself, "Had *I* faith, I would have stayed with Regine."<sup>401</sup> This confession reveals a devastating inadequacy at the center of his identity and speaks to his regret and remorse, which can be interpreted as veering very close to melancholia where the afflicted person's ceaseless "self-abasement" and "self-reproaches" testify to their new guilt-defined identity.<sup>402</sup>

It seems to escape Silentio's notice that there is a parallel between the Akedah and his version of the Agnete story. As compared to the original story of Agnete and the merman, Silentio's brisk retelling reduces Agnete to almost nothing and places the focus on the merman's

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid. *Italics mine.*

<sup>402</sup> Freud, MM, pp. 23 and 27.

trial. Likewise, as we have seen from Chapter 2, the Akedah story and the vast majority of its interpretations pay little to no attention to Sarah thereby denying her the chance to act, impact, or alter the story. As with Regine, these women are given up and their voices lost. But these denials and elisions seemingly invite the reader to explore *what* is being denied and elided and what this means for the text as a whole.

The full story of Agnete and the merman exists just below the surface of Silencio's discourse. In what follows in the next sections I will retrieve and examine this fuller, richer version of the story by giving Jens Baggesen's poem, "Agnete from Holmegaard," a close reading. I will argue that the restored narrative, which puts the focus back on Agnete, proves to be a powerful, artful expression of the experience of pathological mourning, namely the descent into mania and its destructive aftermath. Many of the motifs from the poem overlap with motifs in *Fear and Trembling* but challenge their meaning and purpose. In the last section of the chapter, I will reevaluate the Akedah in light of what was learned from Agnete in order to sketch a new interpretation of Genesis 22. The stories of Agnete and Abraham read through the lens of pathological mourning provide mutual illumination, each to each, just as these stories provide a novel way to think about mania and melancholia.

## 4.2 Land of the Dead and the Frozen Sea Inside

‘*Adâmâh* (אָדָמָה) is Hebrew for *ground* or *soil*, that is, the earth’s visible surface and the subterranean layer just beneath.<sup>403</sup> It denotes the place of human habitation, the realm of shared dwelling, as well as the location where the dead are ceremonially buried and symbolically exist—out of sight but still close enough to be remembered. Though the term “inferno” is closely associated with hell, in Latin *infernus* literally means “below the ground” and denotes the place where the dead (Latin *inferi*, Hebrew *refa’im*) dwell powerless in the dark earth.<sup>404</sup> That both human life and death are so intertwined with ‘*Adâmâh* (אָדָמָה) makes the term a species of contranym or Janus word, where opposites co-mingle in meaningfully suggestive ways within a single term.

‘*Adâmâh* (אָדָמָה) is illustrated in Genesis 2:5, where it states, “Neither wild plants nor grains were growing on the earth—for the Lord God had not yet sent rain to water the earth, and there were no people to cultivate the *soil* [‘*adâmâh* (אָדָמָה)].”<sup>405</sup> Later, in Genesis 4:10, after Cain has murdered his brother Abel, God speaks: “What have you done? Listen! The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to me from the *ground* [‘*adâmâh* (אָדָמָה)].” As I will return to below, it is possible to interpret the concept of ground or soil as a metonym for human existence and its perpetual struggle to survive in the face of entropic forces such as the sea and its flood-

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<sup>403</sup> “‘*Adâmâh* (אָדָמָה),” in *Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (New York: J. Wiley & Sons, 1893), p. XIV. In the same entry, it is also noted that ‘*adâmâh* refers to the “dust which mourners put upon their heads” as a ritual act of grief. Cf. Homer, *Iliad*, Volume II, Books 13-24 (Loeb Classical Library) trans. A.T. Murray and William F. Wyatt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), Book 18, lines 20-35. In agonizing grief over the death of Patroclus, Achilles “took the dark dust and strewed it over his head and defiled his fair face, and on his fragrant tunic the black ashes fell.”

<sup>404</sup> “infernal, adj. and n.” OED online. [www.oed.com/view/Entry/95323](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/95323). Han Urs von Balthasar writes, “Deprived of all strength and all vitality (Isaiah 14, 10), the dead are called *refa’im*, the powerless ones. They are as if they were not (Psalm 39, 14; Sirach 17, 28).” *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), p. 161.

<sup>405</sup> *Holy Bible, New Living Translation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2015), p. 2.

destroying waters that work under and wash away the ground. For a person to dwell in proximity to the sea or to venture out into its waters, is to live with the possibility of being swallowed up by it and lost forever. Holmegaard, a seaside village in southern Denmark, is such a place; Agnete, a young female resident of Holmegaard, is such a person.

A near synonym to 'adâmâh (אָדָמָה), 'âphâr (עָפָר) can mean dust, dirt, ground, and loose earth, but also ashes and debris. The ancient Yahwist (J source) author of Genesis invokes these two terms together in the culminating punishment for Adam and Eve's disobedience to God in the Garden of Eden.<sup>406</sup> For being guilty of eating from the tree of knowledge (something expressly forbidden by God), Adam and Eve and all their human descendants must now laboriously struggle to survive and then—despite their efforts to live—surely and utterly die. Genesis 3:19 states, “By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground [‘adâmâh (אָדָמָה)]— from it you were taken; for you *are* dust [‘âphâr (עָפָר)], and to dust [‘âphâr (עָפָר)] you shall return.”<sup>407</sup> Note, too, the striking parallels between the ancient Hebrew and Latin on this point. Like the Latin connection between humus (soil) and human being, the Hebrew term 'adâmâh (אָדָמָה) (ground) has the same root sense as hâ'ādām (חָאָדָם), the Hebrew word for human man (usually transliterated simply as Adam in Genesis). The following quotation from Genesis 2:7 is illustrative: “Then the Lord God formed man [hâ'ādām (חָאָדָם)] of the dirt [‘âphâr (עָפָר)] from the ground [‘adâmâh (אָדָמָה)], and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man [hâ'ādām (חָאָדָם)] became a living being.”<sup>408</sup> I transliterate the pair of terms to make the connection even more obvious to see: Adam-ah (ground) and ha-adam

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<sup>406</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., p. 6. See also, André LaCocque, *The Trial of Innocence: Adam, Eve and the Yahwist* (Eugene, Oregon, 2006), pp. 30 and 40.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.* Italics mine.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

(human man) form a naturally mirrored pair, the latter coming from and returning to the former, which is not unlike the way mania flows from and returns to melancholia.<sup>409</sup>

Kurt Vonnegut, in his novel *Cat's Cradle*, reimagines this primordial scene in Genesis while also illuminating the lexical and moral ambiguity of these intertwined terms so bound up with human fate. He writes, in part:

God made mud.  
God got lonesome.  
So God said to some of the mud, "Sit up!"  
"See all I've made," said God, "the hills, the sea, the sky, the stars."  
And I was some of the mud that got to sit up and look around.  
Lucky me, lucky mud. [...]  
I feel very unimportant compared to You.  
The only way I can feel the least bit important is to think of all the mud  
that didn't even get to sit up and look around.  
I got so much, and most mud got so little. [...]  
Now mud lies down again and goes to sleep.  
What memories for mud to have!  
What interesting other kinds of sitting-up mud I met!  
I loved everything I saw!  
Good night.<sup>410</sup>

This poem can be read as a straightforward song of gratitude from a humic creature to its creator-god for the gifts of life and memory. However, given Vonnegut's literary preoccupations with exploring the horrors of war and the persistent threat of nuclear holocaust, this poem can also be read in an ironic mode. The apparent words of gratitude belie a latent, unspoken feeling of disgust with being a flawed, fragile, and vulnerable creature that lives in a world of constant disappointment, danger, and irretrievable loss—a mire without escape.

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<sup>409</sup> See entries for *'āphâr*, *'adâmâh*, and *hā'ādām* from bibletool.org.

<sup>410</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (New York: Dial Press Trade Paperbacks, 2010), pp. 220-222.

If belief in God exists at all in this context, then it might be the *Deus absconditus* (the hidden, secretive god) who stays behind the scenes and lets terrible things happen to creatures born to suffer. Imagine the prisoner-of-war protagonist of Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, after witnessing the aftermath of the firebombing of Dresden that resulted in such catastrophic loss of life (mostly to civilians and refugees), saying aloud to himself or to God, "Lucky me...*I loved everything I saw!*" This is an example of irony *par excellence*. The Latin proverb *homo homini lupus est* (man is a wolf to man) comes to mind in this context; or, in modern parlance, *it's a dog-eat-dog world*. Vonnegut's use of the term *mud*, with its connotation of filth and decay, challenges the more neutral meanings of ground or dirt to emphasize the darker side of this origin story. Vonnegut's re-envisioned parable raises questions about what it means to be human and what consequences ensue from having mud at the center of the self. This metaphor lends itself to the experience of pathological mourning where the mud (guilt) in the self accumulates and causes a deadly landslide (melancholia) that buries the self underground away from everyone and everything.

In English as in Latin before it, the word *humus* denotes soil, dirt, ground, and earth. *Humāre*, sharing the same root as *humus*, is the Latin infinitive meaning to bury in the ground or perform funeral rites, and *humāns* is the present participle burying.<sup>411</sup> We see this sense operative in related English terms such as *exhume* ("to dig out or remove something buried from beneath the ground") and *humiliate* as the figurative lowering (to the ground) of the dignity or self-respect of a person.<sup>412</sup> It has been suggested that the English word *human* is directly connected to this *humāre-humāns* nexus.<sup>413</sup> If so, then this etymological lineage tells

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<sup>411</sup> Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Jason Taylor and Robert Miner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020). p. 12.

<sup>412</sup> "exhume, v." OED online. [www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/66211](http://www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/66211); "humiliate, v." OED online. [www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/89366](http://www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/89366).

<sup>413</sup> Ibid. Cf. Dan Beachy-Quick, *Of Silence and Song* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2017), pp. 70-71.

us something important about human nature, namely, that to be human (literally, an “earthling,” of the earth, from the ground) is necessarily bound up with the inner compulsion to bury and memorialize the dead in the earth even as we struggle to accept our losses.

In this vein, the urge to commemorate the dead through rites of burial and words of elegiac mourning are necessary (though not sufficient) conditions of being human, the dying animal aware of its death and needing something to lessen its anxiety about it (the *Todesangst* so central to Kierkegaard, Freud, Heidegger, and Levinas).<sup>414</sup> As Levinas states:

But I think that to approach the face of the other is to worry directly about his death, and this means to regard him straightaway as mortal, finite. The directness of death is the face of the other because the face is being looked on by death. [...] It is directness in itself, the directness of death. And his death, your death, is immediately present to me, even though I do everything possible in order to forget it.<sup>415</sup>

Reading Levinas once again through the lens of pathological mourning, this passage can be interpreted as a description of the descent into melancholia where the melancholic worries over the death of the loved other to the point of obsession and substitution, which in turn allows the introjected lost-object to appear “immediately present.” The presence of the lost-object is in reality a phantom that reminds the melancholic that death is always near. Given the closeness and *directness* of death, what Stolorow refers to as a “constant impediment” for those traumatized by loss,<sup>416</sup> the pathological mourner does *everything* possible to forget and erase it. This includes the self-defensive and self-destructive move into mania. To ceremonially bury the dead in the ground is transmogrified in melancholia into a burial of the dead love-object in the mind so it never has to die. As my interpretation of Baggesen’s poem will demonstrate,

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<sup>414</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Buber: Discovering the Mind*, Volume 2 (New York: Routledge, 1992). Todd Dufresne, *Tales from the Freudian Crypt: The Death Drive in Text and Context* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>415</sup> Levinas, RTB, pp. 135-136.

<sup>416</sup> Stolorow, op. cit., p.41.

Agnete's flight from land to sea and back again is a story of the circular movements of mania and melancholia—of burials on top of burials—that ends in her suicide as she visits the churchyard where her loved ones are buried.

A passage from Eliot's *The Waste Land* synthesizes these themes. From the section titled "The Burial of the Dead," he writes:

...Only  
There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.<sup>417</sup>

Eliot takes pains to express his dissatisfaction with embodied existence (its transience and its unnecessary suffering) and his tone becomes anxious when talking about death ("I had not thought death had undone so many").<sup>418</sup> In a similar trajectory to Agnete's story, the protagonist of *The Waste Land* seeks an escape from his dust-bound fate as images of water begin to appear as a perilous alternative—"Oed und leer das Meer" (Desolate and *empty* is the sea).<sup>419</sup> Ultimately, the protagonist is warned to "fear death by water" indicating that there is no way out, no sublimation or transcendence, not even through the poetic act itself which turns out to be, for him, merely the transcription of "a heap of broken images."<sup>420</sup> Agnete—wounded, restless, and desiring a manic flight from her own fatal past—turns to the sea as well but would have benefited from such admonitions as Eliot provides his protagonist. The sea that accepts Agnete into its depths to be reborn is a manic delusion hiding the frozen sea insider her. If

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<sup>417</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Michael North (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 5-6.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5 and 7.

Eliot's shadow-casting red rock is a tombstone that foretells the uncanny silence of the grave, then it is fitting that in one version of the story Agnete is buried in the sandy soil and her tomb is marked by a stone found on the edge of the sea.<sup>421</sup>

### 4.3 Agnete from Holmegaard, First Half

"Agnete from Holmegaard" is an early nineteenth-century lyric adaptation of the medieval Danish folk ballad titled "Agnete og Havmanden" ("Agnete and the Merman"). Written in 1808 by Danish author Jens Baggesen, "Agnete from Holmegaard" takes the traditional story and creates a poem that is, in my interpretation, a suspenseful portrait of a restless woman overcome by grief and guilt. The only translation of Baggesen's poem into English is by Ann Bushby from 1863.<sup>422</sup> Bredsdorff, a biographer of Hans Christian Andersen, dedicates an entire chapter in their book on Andersen to criticize Bushby's translations.<sup>423</sup>

After reviewing Bushby's translation of Baggesen's poem, it is clear her strategy is two-fold: to keep the original rhyme scheme at any cost even if it requires straying far from the literal sense of the words, and to add colorful additions that are not present in the original work,<sup>424</sup> presumably to make the poem more engaging to readers. In some places, she gets the translation completely wrong. Given these criticisms of Bushby's translation, in what follows is my own translation of "Agnete from Holmegaard," and the interpretation of the poem

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<sup>421</sup> Andersen, *Agnete og Havmanden*, op. cit., p. 109.

<sup>422</sup> Anne Bushby, *The Danes Sketched by Themselves: A Series of Popular Stories by the Best Danish Authors* (Public Domain, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

<sup>423</sup> Elias Bredsdorff, *Hans Christian Andersen: The Story of His Life and Work 1805-1875* (London: Phaidon, 1975). See also, Viggo Pedersen, "Anne Bushby, Translator of Hans Christian Andersen," *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, volume 3, issue 1 (Jan. 2004): pp. 159-172.

<sup>424</sup> Examples will be provided in the footnotes of my translation of "Agnete from Holmegaard."

revolves around reading it through the lens of pathological mourning, which has not been done before.

“Agnete fra Holmegaard:<sup>425</sup> En Ballade” (1808)

“Agnete from Holmegaard: A Ballad”

[1]<sup>426</sup>

*Agnete* var uskyldig,  
Var elsket, var troe;  
Men stedse var hun eensom  
Hun aldrig havde Roe —  
Aldrig Roe —  
Hun frydede vel andre;  
Men aldrig var hun froe.

*Agnete* was innocent,  
Was loved, was believing;  
But she was always lonely  
And never at peace—  
Never still—  
She had brought happiness to others;  
But she was never happy herself.<sup>427</sup>

The title “Agnete from Holmegaard” is striking in that it signals the central crux of the poem: the mortal human presence rooted in the landscape that exists in tension with the power and mystery of the sea and its hidden depths. Holmegaard, as the initial setting and symbol of human

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<sup>425</sup> Holmegaard was a municipality in Storstrøm County in southern Denmark.

<sup>426</sup> Numbers in brackets indicate the stanza number.

<sup>427</sup> Baggesen, AH, p. 163.

dwelling, is metonymically suggestive of the essential connection between ground, burying, and human nature sketched above. The sea, as I will elaborate below, is the central metaphor of the poem representing Agnete's pathological mourning, specifically, her manic attempt to enchant vulgar reality, to escape it.

The poem is composed of almost one thousand words structured into thirty-two septets, that is, stanzas consisting of seven lines each. The rhyme scheme (ABCBBDB) is constant throughout the entire length of the poem. A stanza is not just a grouping of lines arranged on the page, but it can also mean a little room or chamber. It is useful to imagine that in the poem each stanza is like a room the reader can enter into and explore. Some of the rooms are full of ordinary objects and some contain dark secrets that change the entire meaning of the poem. In the analysis that follows, the poem will be explained and interpreted stanza by stanza, room by room, to get a sense of the whole architecture and arc of Agnete's story. If Kierkegaard's treatment of the Agnete and the merman story was a brief walk through the foyer, this analysis will provide a fully guided tour of the entire estate.

The beginning of "Agnete from Holmegaard" is significant. The first line of the first stanza ("Agnete was innocent") provides the reader with what will be in retrospect the first clue to understanding Agnete's self-destructive behavior. The external appearance of innocence hides her internal struggle with debilitating guilt, which is a subtle parallel to the way the ocean hides the realm of the merman that in turn is suggestive of the way the mind hides or represses painful thoughts and feelings from itself. The poem is so effective because the reader is only gradually initiated into Agnete's pain that hides in secret under the surface of her appearance and because the poem ultimately ends with a shocking revelation that dramatically transforms its meaning.

The second line states that Agnete “was loved, was believing.” As will become apparent later in the poem, the question of *who* loved Agnete is the subject of one of the dramatic reversals in store for the reader. Her faith and beliefs, though surely related to her religious convictions, are in my interpretation connected to the everyday absolutisms of everyday life, the more common and less pathological “mania of existence” that most people experience on a daily basis.<sup>428</sup> These absolutisms revolve around a constellation of uncritical beliefs and subtle denials of death, for example, that it appears abstract and far off, if it appears at all. In this pervasive mania of existence when people say things to each other like *see you later*, they unquestioningly assume that there *will* be a later time, that their lives will go on and on into the future, and that the people they love will be there waiting for them when they wake. Agnete, like most people, was no doubt familiar with this ubiquitous experience but in the poem her descent from everyday existential mania into pathological mania reveals their striking differences.

In the middle of the first stanza there is a dramatic double caesura, which invites the reader to make two substantial pauses within a stanza that is entirely marked by enjambment. As readers, we are asked to linger over the repetition of the negation of *røe*,<sup>429</sup> which registers its polysemy as peace, calm, tranquility, and stillness. *Røe*’s opposite, which Agnete embodies, is a kind of dark desire and restlessness that fuels the engine of her double movement—first her plunge into the churning sea and, later, her return to an inhospitable and haunted land. Unlike the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling* who makes two movements (one of resignation to loss and death followed by one that joyfully accepts the restoration of the dead to the fullness of life *in this life*),<sup>430</sup> Agnete’s double movement is a journey from figurative to literal death.

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<sup>428</sup> Beau Shaw, “The Mania of Existence: Klein, Winnicott, and Heidegger’s Concept of Inauthenticity,” *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 46, no. 1, (2015): p. 48-60.

<sup>429</sup> Gitte Frandsen, personal email, September 13, 2020.

<sup>430</sup> Kierkegaard, FT, pp. 69-76.

Here the form of the lines poignantly mirrors the content. The two caesuras marked by two dashes ask the reader to stop reading, to pause the breath that brings each word to life. In that empty space actualized within the caesural stoppage, we are asked to imagine Agnete's restlessness. Standing on the shore next to the ocean, it is Agnete who possesses a sea inside her even as real waves lap against her feet.

[2]

Agnete hun stirred  
I Bølgen den blaa —  
Og see! Daka li Havmand  
Fra Bunden at staae —  
Op at staae —  
Men stedse dog Agnete  
Paa Bølgerne kun saae.

Agnete, she stared  
At the blue waves—  
And look! From the bottom of the sea  
Arose a merman—  
Standing upright—  
But, still, Agnete only saw  
the waves.<sup>431</sup>

[3]

Hans Haar var som spundet  
At pureste Guld,  
Hans Øje det var kiærligt,  
Hans Mine den var huld —  
O! saa huld!

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<sup>431</sup> Baggesen, AH, p. 164.

Hans skiældækte Barm var  
Af Kierlighed fuld.

His hair was spun  
From purest gold,  
His eye was loving,  
He displayed such grace—  
And such kindness!  
His scale-covered heart was  
Full of such love.<sup>432</sup>

[4]

Han sang for Agnete  
Sin Elskov, sin Nød.  
Hans Qvad det var saa kiælent,  
Hans Stemme var saa sød  
O! saa sød!  
Hans Hierte ham fra Læberne  
Saa lifligen flød.

He sang for Agnete  
Of his love, his distress.  
His song was so tender,  
His voice was so sweet,  
O! So sweet!  
His heart poured pleasantly  
From his lips.<sup>433</sup>

The second stanza provides the first appearance of the merman in the poem, but this is an oblique showing. The merman's visual presence hides behind the waves even while his auditory

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

presence reaches Agnete's ears above the din of breakwater. This opacity creates a tension in the poem that is not resolved until the final stanzas. If we read these lines as a developing metaphor for Agnete's post-traumatic mind on the verge of a manic episode, then the dark realm of the sea is a symbol of escape from something strange growing inside her. Correspondingly, the aureate sea-king who rules over the watery deep is the Siren of manic defensiveness itself, promising safety while he lovingly and tenderly draws Agnete into the abyss. There is a long tradition going back to the seventh century that equates the ancient Sirens of Homeric mythology with later depictions of mermaids—it is claimed they are one and the same creature.<sup>434</sup> In the case of Agnete and the merman, the gender roles are reversed but the basic idea remains. The Siren-merman is outwardly beautiful, and his song is intensely inviting, which stanzas three and four vividly illustrate. The first use of exclamation points in the poem are strategically placed to underscore the exciting force of the merman's impact on Agnete.

Traditionally, the song of the Sirens is one that contains two promises, namely, that it will give you knowledge and that you will live to share it,<sup>435</sup> only the latter is a false promise. The Sirens give knowledge about who we really are and why we must die. With the famous exception of Odysseus, Sirens destroy anyone who hears their song as they sit perched atop a pile of human bones. As a song of self-knowledge that leads to death, it is disguised in the most beautiful music. Agnete hears the merman's passionate song, but the perilous source (a wounded part of her own mind) screens itself behind the pulsing ocean. In drawing closer to the merman, she is, in fantasy, leaving her old self and its past behind for a future where anything is possible. In reality, she is roiling inside herself, stuck in the mud of guilt and remorse. Yet the merman fascinates Agnete, drawing her into a realm where those she has loved

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<sup>434</sup> *The Penguin Book of Mermaids*, ed. Cristina Bacchilega and Marie Brown (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), pp. 299-301.

<sup>435</sup> Michael Bull, *Sirens* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 12.

and failed reside untarnished, ghosts disguised as gifts. As Beachy-Quick comments, “The abyss of the Sirens’ song open[s] in us the same abyss, so that to fall into the underworld is only to fall into ourselves, to disappear into our own hearts, and live among the ghosts that dwell there.”<sup>436</sup> But this *living* among ghosts is precisely the lie of mania and the true danger of the Siren song, for what appears as living is in reality a kind of dying.

As a phantasmagoria produced by her own mind, the Siren-merman and the underwater scenes that follow have the feeling of an impressionistic dream sequence. The false cognates *Traum* (German for dream) and τραῦμα (Greek for wound), are suggestive in this context. Some traumas are so painful for the ego and its self-understanding that the conscious mind cannot process them. Thus, a person seamlessly represses and buries traumatic thoughts and feelings in the unconscious part of their mind, which pools into a stagnant reservoir of hurt just below the surface of everyday activities. In the dream of sleep, when the conscious mind is relaxed and lets down its guard, the unconscious pool bubbles up sending cryptic missives to the surface as symbols and symptoms.<sup>437</sup> The sea, like the dream, is full of mystery even to the one who sinks down into it with eyes wide open.

The merman in his duality of revealing and concealing is ultimately the manic self in disguise, a self-induced revenant with a trusting visage. The concept of psychic *condensation* is particularly salient in this context, which signifies how multiple overwhelming emotional experiences coalesce into a single complex image.<sup>438</sup> As the ruler of a magical sea-kingdom that seems heavenly, the merman is simultaneously the overseer of the wet realm where sunken ships disintegrate and become lost. The merman, who is a composite figure—half man and half fish—seemingly grants wishes, heals wounds, and keeps broken things buried. He possesses

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<sup>436</sup> Beachy-Quick, op. cit., p. 205.

<sup>437</sup> Cf. *Freud: Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, op. cit., locations 712 and 3150.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, locations 712 and 936.

the power to restore the family that Agnete has lost and to make it seem like they were never lost in the first place. As a human being, he is mortal and loving, but as a fish he can breathe underwater and survive any flood. Of course, part of what makes the poem so successful and this stanza so effective is that Agnete's tragic past is hidden from the reader even as the merman's true function *qua* Siren is hidden from Agnete. The poem is crowded with ghosts who go unseen until they decide to reveal themselves, and by then it is too late.

The merman's song represents the possibility of a new beginning and a new world for Agnete, who so desperately desires to retrieve those whom she loved, lost, and took for granted. It is easy to imagine her kneeling in Holmegaard's church and praying to God for mercy and redemption. Wendell Berry's prayer-poem is illuminating in this context. This prayer-cum-confession could have been written in the margins of "Agnete from Holmegaard." It reads in part:

I long instead  
for the Heaven of creatures, of seasons,  
of day and night. Heaven enough for me  
would be this world as I know it, but redeemed  
of our abuse of it and one another. It would be  
the Heaven of knowing again...I would like to know  
my wife again, both of us young again,  
and I remembering always how I loved her  
when she was old. I would like to know  
my children again, all my family, all my dear ones—  
to see, to hear, to hold, more carefully than before,  
to study them lingeringly as one studies old verses,  
committing them to heart forever. [...]  
I will be leaving how many beauties overlooked?  
A painful Heaven this would be, for I would know  
by it how far I have fallen short.  
I have not paid enough attention.  
I have not been grateful enough.

And yet this pain would be the measure  
of my love.<sup>439</sup>

Agnete's guilt and longing draw her to the merman and his sea-kingdom, itself an *ersatz* heaven of her earthly love where pain does not exist. If mania is most centrally characterized by an omnipotence that enchants and transforms vulgar reality, then the merman is the projection of her need for it—the power to resurrect the dead, to undo what she has done.

The polysemous word *huld* in stanza three is richly suggestive. On the one hand, it can mean “gracious.”<sup>440</sup> Given that this graciousness is the gift of a kingly merman who symbolizes a manic omnipotence, it is possible to interpret this gesture as a gift of grace and absolution. In addition, *huld* can mean “flesh.”<sup>441</sup> Taken figuratively, Agnete's encounter and courtship with the merman foreshadows the intimacy of touching and being touched. Further, there is a sense that the merman possesses the ability to feel what Agnete feels, to speak straight to her soul. It is as if his omnipotence lets him experience the world through her flesh, which grants him special access to Agnete's suffering and desire. In this way, it is as if he knows what her distressed mind needs in that moment. Of course, as a manic projection, he *is* her mind. And this is precisely one of the places where Kierkegaard's *de Silentio* falls short. *Silentio* proposes to give the merman a human consciousness, but he misses the very real possibility that the merman's human consciousness *is* Agnete's, or at least the part of it that knows it deserves its own destruction and seeks refuge in its illusions. The merman-king, god-like, rising calmly from the raging sea and singing his beautiful song becomes a compelling metaphor for mania's initial hold on the pathological mourner.

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<sup>439</sup> Wendell Berry, *Leavings* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2010), pp. 72-72.

<sup>440</sup> “Huld, n. and adj.,” WordSense Dictionary, wordsense.eu. See also, *Danish Dictionary*, ed. Anna Garde (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), Kindle, location 35623.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid.

[5]

Og hør, min Agnete!

Hvad jeg vil sige dig:

Mit Hierte, det fortæres

Af Længsel efter dig!

Efter dig!

O! vil du det husvale,

O! vil du elske mig?

And listen, my Agnete!

To what I want to tell you:

My heart is consumed

With longing for you!

For you!

O! will you be my wife,

O! will you love me?<sup>442</sup>

[6]

To sølvspændte skoe flux

Paa klintebredden stod —

Der fandtes aldrig skønnere

Paa nogen dronnings fod.

”For din Fod!

Min Elskede (saa qvad han)

Du tage dem imod!”

Two silver-buckled shoes flew

To stand on the rocky shore—

Never did prettier shoes adorn

Any Queen’s feet.

“For your feet!

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<sup>442</sup> Baggesen, AH, p. 165.

My beloved (he said to her)

Take them!”<sup>443</sup>

[7]

Saa tog han af Barmen

Det perlestukne Baand —

Der aldrig saaes et skønnere

Om nogen Dronnings Haand:

“Dette Baand —

Min Elskede! (saa qvad han)

Du bind det om din Haand!”

From his bosom he took

A band of pearls—

Never did a prettier band adorn

Any Queen’s hand:

“This band—

My beloved! (He said)

Bind it around your hand!”<sup>444</sup>

[8]

Saa tog han en Guldring

Af Fingeren sin —

Der fandtes ingen skønnere

I nogen Dronnings Skrin:

”Her, fra min,

Min Elskede! (saa qvad han)

Du sætte den paa din!”

Then he took a gold ring

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

From his finger—  
 Never was there anything prettier in  
 Any Queen's jewelry box:  
 "Here, from me,  
 My beloved! (He said to her)  
 Put it on your finger!"<sup>445</sup>

In some versions of the Agnete and the merman story written in terse rhyming couplets, the transition of Agnete standing alone on dry land to her accompanying the merman to his sea-kingdom occurs in the space of a few lines. For example, in a version collected in the late nineteenth century, the first line of the poem has Agnete walking along the beach and in the second line the merman appears.<sup>446</sup> In the next stanza (line six) the merman speaks for the very first time to ask if Agnete will be his "true love."<sup>447</sup> In the very next stanza (line 8) Agnete speaks for the first time in the poem to say simply, "yes, good sooth, that will I be / wilt thou bear me down to the depths of the sea."<sup>448</sup> And in the very next line she is being "borne down under the tide."<sup>449</sup> The dizzying speed of this exchange has led some commentators to wonder why a young woman would so quickly agree to leave everything behind to join a stranger, a creature like no other, in the forbidding depths of the ocean. Other commentators, including Kierkegaard, infer from this plot point that the merman is a vicious seducer who, despite the amorous words exchanged in these verses, abducts Agnete like Hades abducted Persephone. Bernini's sculpture, *The Rape of Proserpina* (1622), comes to mind with Proserpina's twisting body and panicked face and Hades' grasping hand pressing itself cruelly into her thigh. In my

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>446</sup> "Agnes and the Merman," *Danish Ballads*, trans. E.M. Smith-Dampier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), pp. 123-126.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

interpretation, this willingness to go with the merman is easily resolved. The magnetic pull of the merman fits well with the pull of mania on the persecuted self on the verge of a breakdown.

The novelty of Baggesen's version of the story is that it provides more details of this strange courtship that paints a different, more complex, picture of what attracts Agnete to the merman. We have already seen in stanzas four and five descriptions of his attractive physical appearance, his artful singing, his eloquence, and his passion. In stanza five, the merman finally asks Agnete to love him. Strikingly, his longing mirrors her longing from stanza one. If the exact object of Agnete's longing is still veiled in mystery at this point in the poem, the merman's is stated clearly and succinctly in stanza five: it is wholeheartedly Agnete. His heart, unlike hers, is fortified under protective scales. He is the embodiment of security. He is also the diametrical opposite to dry land and the life she has hitherto known but can no longer endure. What might appear as danger to an outsider is a compelling alternative to reality for Agnete.

Baggesen provides further contextual layers to Agnete's choice to accompany the merman. In stanzas six, seven, and eight, the merman offers her precious gifts of shoes and jewelry, including a band of pearls and a ring, which may symbolize their engagement or coupling but may also indicate the literary device of *doubling* where one person's mind (Agnete) is made manifest in the guise of different character (the merman). On the surface, this section of the poem can be interpreted as a straightforward narrative of one person attracting another person with luxurious gifts in a spectacle of taste and wealth. On my interpretation, however, the merman and the sea are *internal* to Agnete. The merman and his gifts are her own repressed and projected needs, desires, and fantasies expressed in condensed symbols. The merman giving gifts to Agnete is simultaneously Agnete giving gifts to herself—her melancholic ego recklessly surrendering to the manic impulse that denies her traumatic losses

even if that denial poisons everything. The following lines from Anne Sexton's poem "Live" might be read as a similar phenomenon:

*Live or die, but don't poison everything [...]*

Here,

all along,

thinking I was a killer,

anointing myself daily

with my little poisons.

But no.

I'm an empress.<sup>450</sup>

So, what appear as lavish gifts of great value given by an omnipotent merman are actually little poisons she gives to herself. In the Sexton poem, the last line quoted above reveals a switch from reality *qua* killer to mania *qua* empress. In a similar fashion, Agnete changes from melancholic *qua* guilt-ridden killer to manic *qua* sea-queen and the poem is the record of this transformation.

The merman is Agnete's double who knows her deepest wounds and wishes. His power is her feeling of omnipotence made manifest. He is the catalyst to a subaqueous ecstasy that hides the downward pull of suicide. The objects he gives Agnete in stanzas six through eight are equally disguised yet illuminating of Agnete's true melancholia. In stanza eight, the merman offers the gift of shoes that are presumably both beautiful and expensive. On the surface, this is a gift that signifies a creature comfort and an extravagant display of style and status, but it can also symbolize the ecstasy of redemption wrought from exile. In similar fashion, Cinderella's desire for salvation and her transformation from poor indentured servant to well-dressed princess-to-be is elegantly represented by a sole glass slipper.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>450</sup> Anne Sexton, *Live or Die* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), pp. 87 and 89.

<sup>451</sup> *Cinderella*, trans. Marcia Brown (New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1988).

In psychoanalysis, shoes can symbolize feminine sexuality generally and the shoe fetish a sublimated form of desire for sexual intercourse.<sup>452</sup> Taking this interpretation as a clue to Agnete's disguised desires, the merman's flying shoes might symbolize her desire for sexual union, progeny, and the regeneration of her family (thereby restoring her lost loves and healing her wounded identity). Also, it is possible to read the women's shoes as synecdochical of female gender, giving presence to Agnete's lost daughters in their gnawing absence. In the manic state of denial, one can imagine Agnete putting on the merman's shoes and smiling even as her foot slides into the wet grave of memory. In a sense, "Agnete From Holmegaard" is a poem that traverses the geography of memory while tracking the movements of one woman's ill-fated expedition through it.

Stanza seven introduces the gift of a band of pearls. The band itself can symbolize a kind of ligature. Like the Hebrew word *akedah* (binding), a "ligature of pearls" is suggestive of the way Agnete is bound through love and guilt to the lost-object and how it is intertwined with her identity. Like the ambivalent nature of the shoes in the previous stanza, ligature also hints at the sinister aspect of the gift beneath the overt splendor of the pearls. In one sense, the band represent the way Agnete is bound to her guilty conscience which she wears around her wrist like a shackle while the pearls are the manic distraction she cannot take her eyes off. These images of imprisonment and manic flight are ominous as Agnete is on the verge of venturing into the underwater world of the merman in the coming stanzas.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>452</sup> Freud: *Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, op. cit., location 1298 and 1314.

<sup>453</sup> Like the protagonist of Eliot's masterwork, *The Waste Land*, Agnete is not only diving down into a watery hell, she *is* this hell. This theme (that the monster or hell itself is found within rather than without) is already taken up in Plato's allegory of the cave from the *Republic*. Plato asks his readers to imagine prisoners confined since birth in a subterranean cave are forced to stare at a wall where shadows dance before their eyes. Anonymous men cast these derivative shapes from a parapet behind and above the prisoners, tending a flame while performing the pantomime. One of the prisoners is set free to discover the truth of the outside world and the inferiority of his former existence, which dazzles and pains him. Sympathy for his former cellmates sends him back into the cave to help set them free. The prisoners are hostile and resist the lessons of his education. The metaphorical registers of the story

Despite their lustrous beauty, an image of the dead is conjured in the gift of pearls, which can connote human eyes that no longer see. The eyes transform from sight to sightlessness through decomposition.<sup>454</sup> In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the character Ariel, a quasi-mystical spirit who can do magic, sings the following song to the character Ferdinand who just survived a shipwreck:

Full fathom five thy father lies,  
Of his bones are coral made:  
Those are pearls that were his eyes,  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange:  
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell-  
Hark! Now I hear them,  
*Ding-dong bell.*<sup>455</sup>

Ariel sings to Ferdinand of his father's death at sea.<sup>456</sup> According to the song, the corpse has sunk down thirty feet below the surface of the ocean and begun to deteriorate. The pearls are both an analogy for dead eyes that can no longer see and also a euphemism for the traumatic loss of life. The phrase "sea-change" (first coined by Shakespeare in this passage),<sup>457</sup> signifies

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suggest, at first glance, *external* forces of injustice, i.e. those things in an imperfect society that keep people deceived and disadvantaged, e.g. racism, sexism, religious intolerance, child abuse, human trafficking, unfair economic practices, and political repression. But Plato's guiding thesis is that the external realities of the republic reflect and are subsidiary to the internal reality of individual souls. On this track, the diseased brain is where prisoners play with shadows. The shadows, at least in Agnete's case, are images of the dead. The prison is the mind itself. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), Book VII, 514a-517c, pp. 186-189.

<sup>454</sup> Cf. Robert Lowell, "A Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," *Lord Weary's Castle* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946), p.8. "When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light / Flashed from his matted head and marble / feet, / He grappled at the net / With the coiled, hurdling muscles of his thighs: / The corpse was bloodless, a botch of reds and whites, / Its open, staring eyes / Were lustreless dead-lights."

<sup>455</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999), p.19.

<sup>456</sup> See the earlier discussion of *The Waste Land* on pages 132-133 where the theme of death by water was first introduced.

<sup>457</sup>"sea, n." OED online. [www-oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/174071](http://www-oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/174071).

a morbid metamorphosis. For Agnete, these pearls-as-eyes are another clue of the sea-change happening inside her as she grapples with her own traumatic losses—not a father like Ferdinand, but daughters whose eyes once shined like pearls in the light of day and have since lost their lustre buried in Holmegaard cemetery. The fact that Agnete is willing to accept these gifts starts the magical transformation of reality into a new world that *denies* this reality, a sea-change of the mind.

In stanza eight, Agnete receives the gift of a ring from the merman. This precedes what is essentially a proposal of marriage in the next stanza and so seems like a straightforward symbol of love and devotion. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and Plato's parable about the ring of Gyges, are examples of a literary tradition that invests rings with the magical power to rule the world. Given that mania does its work through the delusion of omnipotence, the introduction of a ring of absolute power is appropriate at this point in Agnete's journey to madness. The ring, like the band of peals before it, binds Agnete to the merman seemingly sealing her cathexis to this fantasy love-object. In reality, Agnete is in a state of suspended animation where she cannot form new attachments or relationships with others. This ring, even with all its power, is a cursed one. Like Brunhilde in Wagner's epic who is punished with eternal sleep and trapped within a ring of fire, Agnete is not only placing a ring on her finger but casting a ring around her mind cutting her off from others.<sup>458</sup> This ring of fire is placed around the self as an act of self-preservation even as it burns up everything it touches.

The ring can also function as a symbol for the human mouth. It is possible to imagine the small ring representing the small mouth of a child crying out to its mother. Agnete, who

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<sup>458</sup> Richard Wagner, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, trans. John Deathridge (New York: Penguin Classics, 2020), p. 483.

longs to be reconciled with her lost daughters, eagerly accepts the ring. Her longing already prominent in stanza one, now reaches a crescendo as she accepts every saving accoutrement—shoes, pearls, and ring. In a scene both poignant and tragic, the remembered cries from her lost daughters are momentarily silenced as the ring slides upon her finger, the shoes upon her feet, and the pearls around her wrist. She is ready to join the merman to co-create a new world where these mouths will join with bodies and warm her in the coldest ocean. Yet, given the conclusion of Agnete's story in the final stanzas, we might retrospectively see the ring as a hole in the ground for a grave or the simply the hole inside Agnete herself.

[9]

Agnete ned paa Himlen  
I Havdybet saae —  
Den Bølge var saa sølvklar  
Og Bunden var saa blaa!  
O! saa blaa!  
Da smilede den Havmand  
Og sang, og sagde saa:

Agnete saw the sky  
Reflected in the fathoms—  
The waves were clear as silver,  
The depths were so blue!  
O! so blue!  
Then the merman smiled  
And sang, saying:<sup>459</sup>

[10]

Og hør, min Agnete,

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<sup>459</sup> Baggesen, AH, p. 167.

Hvad jeg dig sige vil:  
For dig mit Hierte brænder  
Af Kiærligheds Ild —  
O vær mild! —  
Siig! Vil du mig husvale?  
Vil du mig høre til?

Now listen, my Agnete,  
To what I have to tell you:  
For you my heart burns  
With the fire of love—  
O be gentle!—  
Tell me! Will you be my solace?  
Will you hear my words?”<sup>460</sup>

[11]  
Og hør du, skøn Havmand!  
Jeg vil tilhøre dig!  
Hvis ned i Havets Afgrund  
Du med vil tage mig!  
Tag du mig!  
Og før mig til din Havbund,  
Der vil jeg elske dig!

O listen, sweet merman!  
I want to belong to you!  
If only you will take me down  
Into the abyss of the sea!  
Take me!  
Take me to your seabed,

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<sup>460</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

There I will love you!”<sup>461</sup>

[12]

Han stopped hendes Øre,  
Han stopped hendes Mund;  
Saa foer han med den Skønne  
Dybt 154ka l Havets Bund.  
Mund paa Mund —  
Du favnedes og kyste sig  
Saa trygt paa Havets Bund.

He stopped her ear,  
He stopped her mouth;  
And they journeyed through sublime depths  
To reach the underside of the world.  
Mouth on mouth—  
They embraced and kissed  
So safe on the seafloor.<sup>462</sup>

Just as she had done in stanza two, stanza nine depicts Agnete staring at the blue water. The color blue, now intensified, subtly suggests sadness.<sup>463</sup> In the earlier stanzas the emphasis was on what she did *not* see but only heard (the merman and his song), but the emphasis here is on what she sees reflected on the surface of the sea, namely, the sky inverted, shimmering, catching and holding her eye. Looking down, the sky appears to be at her feet almost as if she

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>463</sup> The sea-sky is described as *so* silver (“saa sølvklar”) and *so* blue (“saa blaa”). As part of the sprawling etymology of the word “sad,” there is a connection with sadness to the “saturation of color.” The examples given to illustrate this usage come from Old High German but are not far from the early nineteenth-century Danish present here: *satcrā* dark grey, *satarōt* dark red, and *sattblau* dark blue. The sea and sky are so colorful one can imagine Agnete needing to look away and shield her eyes. In a similar sense, Agnete’s melancholic heart is so saturated with sadness, that she must look away from it. What she sees in the other direction is mania. Yet her desire for love and reconciliation remains insatiable. “sad, adj., n., and adv.” OED online. [www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view](http://www.oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view)

is walking on her hands. As Hölderlin comments, “One can fall upward just as well as downward.”<sup>464</sup> Fittingly, for Hölderlin this upward falling is symbolic of an excessive “enthusiasm” that borders on mania and has dangerous implications.<sup>465</sup> In plunging downward into the sea, Agnete is also falling upward into the inverted sky. Her world is upside down. Her falling upward is a sign of mania’s escalation and its elevated mood. There is a fragment of poetry by Celan that speaks to this kind of falling and its delusory destination. He writes:

Infinite also the distances between his I and his You: from both sides, from  
both poles, the bridge is cast: in the middle, halfway across, there where  
the bridge pier is expected, from above or from below, is the place of the poem. From  
above: invisible and uncertain. From below: out of the abyss  
of hope for the distant, the future-distant kin.<sup>466</sup>

Celan captures the subtle split in the psyche of the pathological mourner where the I and the You are *both* inside of him. The disorientation of the above and below is similar to Agnete’s perception of sky and sea. Above is uncertainty and below is an abyss. The abyss of the sea, which Agnete is about to enter headlong, contains the false hope for the distant (the past, the dead) and future-distant (resurrected, restored) kin, namely, her children. I will turn to a discussion of the tasks of poetry in the next chapter, but it is worth mentioning here how the “bridge pier” metaphor Celan introduces adds something significant to the sea imagery of Baggesen’s poem. Somewhere between sea and sky there is a floating bridge, a path between mania and melancholia, which is a fitting symbol for the power of poetry.

Stanza ten reemphasizes the split self talking to itself. When the merman asks for gentle solace, it is really Agnes talking to herself from her manic persona of the merman. These

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<sup>464</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), p. 45.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid.

<sup>466</sup> Paul Celan, *Microliths They Are, Little Stones: Posthumous Prose*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Contra Mundum Press, 2020), Fragment 156.

questions might serve the function of signaling the required criteria that must be met before the full descent into the sea of mania can begin: to be gentle and to provide comfort and consolation in her time of constant sorrow. Stanza eleven provides Agnete's conditional response to the merman's questions. *If* he will take her to the very bottom of the sea and make love to her in his seabed, *then* she will go with him. This moment signals Agnete's desire to find a new love and begin a new family. This is her innermost vision of triumph and euphoria. This welcoming abyss is the manic inversion of the abyss that separates her from the world and the formation of new cathexes.

Stanza twelve is the part of Baggesen's poem that Kierkegaard quoted in his letter to Regine. The "stopping" here is polysemous and highly suggestive. On the level of the literal, the merman is plugging Agnete's mouth and ears to keep her from harm in their descent. It also makes sense that she would be stopping or holding her breath for their journey downward. Also, the stopping or shutting of her ears and mouth is an apt metaphor for the anti-cathexis of the outside that reinforces the narcissism and solipsism inherent in her illness. Referring back to her ring *qua* hole from stanza eight, the stopping could be also viewed as the act of plugging Agnete's painful aperture. Finally, the phrase "mouth on mouth," which Kierkegaard saw as a symbol of future love and happiness with Regine after much sacrifice and heartache, might serve here to signal the act of imminent sexual consummation that foreshadows her desire to procreate and the breath that revives and refreshes Agnete from her journey into the abyss—in both cases breath is seen as a symbol of life. As we will see in the next stanzas, both of these meanings fuse together in the birth of new children in the safeness of a realm far from the dangers and pains of the real world on dry land.

[13]

Agnete, hun var der

I Aaringer to —  
De elskede hinanden  
Saa kiærlige og troe —  
Elskovsfroe.  
To Sønner der hun fødte  
I Havmandens Boe.

Agnete was there  
For two years—  
So affectionate and faithful—  
They loved each other—  
Passionately.  
She gave birth to two sons  
In the merman's realm.<sup>467</sup>

[14]  
Agnete sad rolig  
Ved Vuggen der, og sang —  
Da hørte hun en Jordlyd,  
Som ovenover klang  
Ding, ding, dang;  
Og det var Kirkens Klokker  
I Holmegaard, som klang.

Agnete sat peacefully  
At the cradle, singing—  
When she heard from the upper world  
Sounds ringing out  
Ding, dong, ding;  
It was the church bells

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<sup>467</sup> Baggesen, AH, p. 169.

From Holmegaard, clanging.<sup>468</sup>

[15]

Agnete lod Vuggen

Saa pludseligen staae,

Og ilte til sin Havmand:

Skjøn Havmand tør jeg gaae?

Tør jeg gaae?

O tør jeg end før Midnat

Til Holmekirke gaae?

Then suddenly Agnete

Left the cradle,

She rushed to the merman asking:

“Lovely merman, dare I go?

Dare I go?

O dare I go to the church in Holmegaard

Before midnight?”<sup>469</sup>

[16]

Du gierne maa før Midnat

Til Holmekirke gaae —

Naar kun før Dag du vender

Til Børnene de smaae —

Gaae! Gaae! Gaae!

Men vend før Dag tilbage

Til Børnene de smaae!

“Before midnight you may go

To the church in Holmegaard—

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

If only you return to our little ones  
By daybreak—  
Go! Go! Go!  
But by the morning light return  
To our little ones!”<sup>470</sup>

[17]

Han stopped hendes Øre,  
Han stopped hendes Mund,  
Saa foer han op med hende  
Til Holmegaardens Grund —  
Mund fra Mund  
De skiltes, og han dukked’  
Igien til Havets Bund

He stopped her ear,  
He stopped her mouth,  
Then brought her up  
To Holmegaardian soil—  
Mouth on mouth  
They kissed and parted. Then he dove  
Once more beneath the sea.<sup>471</sup>

Stanza thirteen and the first two lines of stanza fourteen mark the apotheosis of Agnete’s mania. The transition from stanza twelve to thirteen is abrupt, rushing forward two whole years since Agnete accompanied the merman to his seabed in the deepest depths of the ocean. The fact that the height of Agnete’s mania takes place in the lowest point of the ocean is an important detail that neatly expresses the subterfuge of mania. Paradoxically, in the flush of euphoric

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<sup>470</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

escape and erotic satisfaction and the accompanying tranquility of restoring and enjoying her family, she is at her farthest remove from safety or well-being. In the same vein, the sudden expanse of time is an illusion hiding its stasis—arrested time remains the governing internal experience for the pathological mourner. The compression on the body at such ocean depths is mirrored by the compression of past and future on the present. In mania and melancholia, “all duration or stretching collapses, past becomes present, and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition.”<sup>472</sup>

The apotheosis in these nine lines combines the grandiosity of the setting (sea kingdom fortified at the lowest point in the sea) and the stature of her new husband (the sea king himself providing love, passion, protection, and progeny) to create Agnete’s own personal beatific vision. The moment when we find Agnete sitting and singing beside her baby’s cradle is the moment of her bliss. It is also here that Hans Christian Andersen in his dramatic poem about Agnete provides a significant supplement to this particular moment in Baggesen’s poem. In Andersen’s version, we get to hear what Agnete is singing to her new baby. In a section of the play titled “Agnete’s Lullaby,” we hear her singing to both of her two children, the baby in the cradle and the older child sitting next to her on the floor. These are the words sung underwater in a magical kingdom to her magical children:

[1]

Sol deroppe ganger under Lide,  
Sov mit Barn, saa bli’r du stærk og stor,  
Paa den vilde Havhest skal du ride,  
Under Bølgen dejligst Engen gror.

The sun strides across the sky and sets,  
Sleep my child, so you will become big and strong,

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<sup>472</sup> Stolorow, op. cit., p. 20.

You will ride the wild sea horse,  
Beneath the waves grows the most beautiful meadow.

[2]

Hvalerne med deres brede Finne  
Over dig som store Skyer gaa,  
Sol og Maane gennem Vandet skinne,  
Begge to du 161ka li Drømme faa.

The whales with their large fins  
Float over you like great clouds,  
Sun and moon shine through the water,  
You shall see them both in your dreams.

[3]

Visselul! Jeg fødte dig med Smerte!  
Bliv min Glæde altid Aar for Aar,  
Du har drukket Livet ved mit Hjerte,  
Hver din Taare til mit Hjerte gaar.

Sleep! I gave birth to you in pain!  
Always be my happiness year after year,  
you have drunk life from my heart,  
each of your tears flows to my heart.

[4]

Sov, mit Barn! Jeg sidder ved din Vugge,  
Lad mig kysse dine Øjne til,  
Naar engang de begge mine lukke,  
Hvem mon dig da Moder være vil!

Sleep, my child! I am sitting by your cradle,

Let me kiss your eyes shut,  
When the day comes when I will shut mine,  
I wonder who will be a mother to you!<sup>473</sup>

What begins as a sweet and hopeful lullaby in the first two verses changes tone by the third. The word “sleep,” used in the literal sense in verse two, strains toward the figurative in verse three. The use of the exclamation appears abruptly and incongruously in the context of a soft and soothing lullaby intended to lull a baby to sleep. The next sentence furthers the shift in tone describing her own pain in birthing the child, again with an exclamation point. There is an ambivalence in the next three lines. Living in her safe, remote, and hidden kingdom, the imperative structure of the sentence belies her manic omnipotence and tranquility. When she writes, “You have drunk life from my heart,” there is a subtle allusion to the way substitution, in the wake of traumatic loss, introjects the love-object which gives it new life by sacrificing a part of itself. Agnete’s next words, “each of your tears flows to my heart” can be read as an allusion to the annihilatory sadness in melancholia, but it can also serve as an ingenious description of how the newly installed lost-object begins to take the ego as its object directing its tears and bitter recriminations toward the very heart or core of the self.

In the fourth and final verse of the song, the third instantiation of the jolting “Sleep!” exclaimed at her child draws attention to itself by being the only word or phrase that repeats in the song three times. This technique of repetition contributes to the song’s formal structure and rhythm. Repetition, both in poems and in life, can be interpreted as a sign of obsession since what a person obsesses over is returned to again and again. This formal technique mirrors and compliments the content of the song that reveals the devolving of mania back into the obsessive and persecuted self of melancholia. In this vein, Agnete’s plea to kiss her child’s eyes shut,

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<sup>473</sup> Andersen, “Agnete og havmanden,” op. cit., p. 26. Translation mine.

another euphemism for death, reveals the intensity of this cathexis while alluding to the painful reality that she is *responsible* for her children's eyes closing. The next line, "When the day comes when I will close mine," can be interpreted as a dark foreboding of Agnete's death at the end of the poem. The final line is another example of the ambivalence at work in pathological mourning. As Freud observes that self-accusations are oftentimes coded and conflicted accusations of the love-object, the last line that reads, "I wonder who will be a mother to you [when I am gone]" can be interpreted in just this way: to ask *who will you be without me* is also to ask *who will I be without you*. Her manic flight from reality is on the very precipice of its disintegration. It is as if at the height of manic denial, her repressed memories, however indirect or unconscious, become strongly felt even in their absence.

The second half of stanza fourteen describes Holmegaard's church bells ringing and reaching Agnete's ears. The church bells can be read as both a synecdoche for the Church and its cemetery, but also as a metonym for the clanging call of conscience. The bells' loud song—ding, dong, ding—passes through air and sea to pierce Agnete's sheltered mind. The next four stanzas leave all tranquility behind and depict Agnete's urgency to return to Holmegaard. Before she does, she rushes to her merman husband to query if she can leave the sea and return to dry land. His response is telling. In one seven-line stanza, the mer-king pleads twice for Agnete to return to their children when she is done with her visit. Back in stanza eleven, on the verge of rushing away and joining the merman in his sea kingdom, Agnete gave one condition for her leaving, namely, that he consummate their love in his seabed and by implication help her start a new family. Now in stanza sixteen, on the verge of leaving the merman to return to her life above the surface, the merman gives his own condition: do not abandon the children and become lost to them and they to you. In the context of pathological mourning, this imperative comes from Agnete's own pathological conscience ventriloquized through the

figure of the merman, himself a symbol of mania. Finally, in perfect symmetry with stanza twelve, the merman blocks Agnete's ears and mouth for the return journey leaving her on the beach before giving her one last kiss and disappearing into the sea. Now back in Holmegaard with her senses returning, mania's grip continues to loosen even as the fist of melancholia is waiting inside the church to strike.

#### 4.4 Agnete from Holmegaard, Second Half

[18]

Agnete sig skyndte  
Til Kirkegaarden hen —  
Der mødte hun sin Moder,  
Og vendte sig igien —  
„O! hvorhen?”  
Men hendes Moder vendte  
Den flygtende igien:

Agnete hurried straight  
To the churchyard—  
There she encountered her mother,  
Who was startled to see her—  
“O! Where have you been?”  
The mother spoke to her  
Fugitive daughter.<sup>474</sup>

[19]

“Og hør du, Agnete,

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<sup>474</sup> Baggesen, AH, p. 172.

Hvad jeg vil sige dig:  
Hvor har du havt dit Ophold  
Saalænge langt fra mig —  
Langt fra mig?  
Siig, hvor du har opholdt dig  
Saalænge, hemmelig?”

“Agnete, you must hear  
What I have to tell you:  
Where have you been for so long  
So far away from me—  
Away from me?  
Tell me where you stayed  
So long in hiding?”<sup>475</sup>

[20]

O Moder jeg har dvælet  
I Havmandens Boe:  
Med ham jeg alt dernede  
Har avlet Sønner to.  
Und mig Roe!  
Jeg nu gaaer hen at bede,  
Og vender til min Boe!

O Mother I have dwelt  
In the merman's realm:  
Down in the blue abyss  
I bore him two sons.  
Let me have a peaceful life!  
I come to pray before returning

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

To the underwater realm.<sup>476</sup>

[21]

“Og hør du, Agnete,  
Hvad jeg vil sige dig:  
Her dine to smaa Døttre  
Tildøde græmmer sig —  
Skrig i Skrig  
De græde, de smaa Piger,  
De længes efter dig!”

“Agnete, you must hear  
What I have to tell you:  
Here your two young daughters  
Are grieving for you—  
They scream and scream,  
Your little girls are crying,  
How they long for you!”<sup>477</sup>

[22]

Lad længes, lad græde  
De to smaa Døttre her!  
Mit Øre, det er lukket,  
Jeg hører dem ei der —  
Dem ei der!  
Og der de to smaa Sønner  
Forsmægted, blev jeg her.

Let them long, let them weep  
The two young daughters here!

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<sup>476</sup> Ibid., p. 173

<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

My ear, it is closed shut,  
I do not hear them there—  
Not there!  
Out there my two little sons  
Would perish if I stayed here.<sup>478</sup>

[23]

O! red dig de Arme!  
O! lad dem ei forgaae!  
O! tænk dog paa den mindste,  
Som end i Vuggen laae!  
Hiem du gaae!  
Og glem de to smaae Trolde  
For dine ægte Smaa!

O! Save your poor daughters!  
O! Do not let them perish!  
O! Think of the youngest one  
Lying in the cradle!  
You must go home!  
Forget those little urchins  
And stay with your real children.<sup>479</sup>

[24]

Lad blomstre, lad falme,  
De to, som Himlen vil!  
Mit Hierte det er lukket  
Det hører dem ei til —  
Dem ei til.  
Jeg ene for min Havmands

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

Smaa Sønner leve vil!

Let them flourish, let them falter,  
    These two, as heaven decrees!  
My heart is closed.  
    It does not belong to them—  
        Not to them.  
I will live solely for my merman's  
    Little sons!<sup>480</sup>

[25]<sup>481</sup>

Og kan du dem glemme,  
    Som ved dit Bryst dig loe,  
Saa tænk paa deres Faders  
    Din Ægtemands Troe —  
        Kiend hans Troe!  
Saasnart du var forsvundet,  
    Han mistede sin Roe.  
  
And if you can forget them,  
    Who were so happy at your bosom,  
Then think of their father's,  
    Your husband's faith—  
        Know his faith!  
As soon as you disappeared,

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>481</sup> Cf. Bushby, op. cit., stanza 25:

'Alas! though thou canst thus  
    Thy smiling babes forget;  
Yet think upon their father's faith,  
    Thy noble lord's regret,  
    The fate he met!  
As soon as thou wert lost to him  
    His sun of joy was set.

He lost his composure.<sup>482</sup>

[26]

Han sørged en Sommer,  
    Han sørgede for dig —  
Og ned fra Holme Fieldklint  
    Han styrtede sig —  
    Styrter sig.  
Der funde de paa Stranden  
    I Skumringen hans Lig.

He mourned a summer,  
    How he mourned for you—  
Then down from Holmegaard's cliffs  
    He threw himself—  
    Threw himself.  
There they found his corpse  
    On the beach at dusk.<sup>483</sup>

[27]

Nu nys man det lagde  
    I Kisten ned med Sang —  
Og hørte du, min Datter,  
    Ei Klokkerne, som klang  
    Ding, ding, dang?  
Nu vendte hendes Moder sig  
    Og Midnatsklokken klang.

Here they laid down his coffin  
    With funereal songs—

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<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

And did you not hear, my daughter,  
The church bells that clang  
Ding, dong, ding?  
Now her mother turned to go  
As the bells chimed midnight.<sup>484</sup>

Having left in great haste from her ocean home and family, Agnete continues her breakneck speed straight to Holmegaard Church. At the doorsteps of the church Agnete is met by her mother who appears startled at the chance encounter with her missing daughter. What follows in the next six stanzas is a dialogue back and forth between mother and daughter, each speaking to each other in alternating stanzas. Agnete's mother speaks first. She asks a question that is especially poignant for a pathological mourner—where have you been and where have you been hiding? In stanza twenty, Agnete replies by quickly summarizing her two-year stay with the merman and their two children together. At this news, the mother reveals a crucial truth to Agnete, reminding her that she *already* has two young daughters who she abandoned to live in the sea. The description of the small girls grieving and screaming is an important detail as it dramatically parallels the way the melancholic self endlessly grieves and longs for its lost love while the introjected lost-object continually screams at the self, exacting blame and punishment for the very loss it mourns.

In stanza twenty-two, Agnete, perhaps surprisingly to the reader, refuses to hear her daughter's cries. The idea of wanting to return to them or admitting any wrongdoing for leaving them does not seem to cross Agnete's mind, affected as it is by the lingering tentacles of mania wrapped around her memory. Instead, Agnete directs her attention to her two new sons at the bottom of the ocean who would perish because of her absence. When Agnete says her ears are

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

shut, this immediately recalls her stopped ears for the downward journey into the sea, into mania. In both cases, the gnawing call of reality is silenced.

In stanza twenty-three, Agnete's mother increases her intensity and instead of just beseeching Agnete to hear her daughters, she now pleads for her to *save them from perishing*. The mother then describes the youngest daughter as lying, presumably helpless, in the cradle. She then implores Agnete to go home and forget the children in the sea who are merely "urchins" compared to her daughters. The mention of *cradle* here recalls the height of Agnete's mania where, feeling at peace in her new home, sang serenely to her baby son in his cradle. In this moment outside the church, her mother's persistent message to her daughter symbolizes the pull and call of melancholia slipping past Agnete's manic defenses. But still Agnete resists. Going beyond her closed ears, Agnete proclaims her *heart* is closed and does not belong to her daughters. She tries to feign total indifference to her lost daughters and affirms her total devotion to her new sons. This is mania's last stand at holding on to its beatitude and denying melancholia's claim on the self. In some versions of the story, Agnete is depicted as laughing maniacally in the final verse of the poem. For example, in a version collected in *Danish Ballads* where Agnete is said to have borne seven children with the merman, Agnete states in the final lines, "I think not of the big ones, I think not of the small, / Of the baby in the cradle I'll think least of all! / —Ha ha ha! / Of the baby in the cradle I'll think least of all."<sup>485</sup> These taunts and this manic outburst of laughter represent the polar opposite of the guilt-ridden self seeking punishment for its crimes.

In stanzas twenty-five and twenty-six, Agnete's mother provides a second revelation to the reader, namely, that Agnete had a husband who she left behind as well. What is apparently new to Agnete is the fact that he killed himself. In stanza one, Agnete was described as

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<sup>485</sup> *Danish Ballads*, op. cit., p.126.

believing, literally faithful. At this point in the poem the evidence of her *lack* of faithfulness to her husband and daughters has become clear. In a structural parallel, the mother describes the husband as faithful but in the space of eight lines reveals how he lost is composure, mourned for months, and committed suicide.

Though the structure of stanza twenty-seven makes it ambiguous, Agnete's mother's last words to her daughter can be interpreted to mean that the church bells Agnete heard ringing while she sat at the bottom of the sea were funereal bells for her late husband. At the same time as Agnes herself was singing to her new baby son in the cradle, funereal bells were ringing out for someone she had loved and lost. This juxtaposition is a compelling metaphor for just how intertwined mania and melancholia really are, of how one song interrupts the other. On this interpretation, the timeline of events starts to unravel. It was said that Agnete was gone two years and that her husband died after mourning her absence for one summer—yet here we find Agnete at the church where he was buried earlier that same day it would seem. The final five stanzas of the poem shed light on how this incongruity might be accounted for. Time is the last thing mentioned before Agnete's full regression to annihilatory sadness. Her mother departs leaving Agnete utterly alone. As the bells chime midnight and one day turns into the next, so does mania pass over into melancholia.

[28]

Agnete, hun traadde

Ad Kirkedøren ind —

Og alle de smaa Billeder

De vendte sig omkring —

Rundt omkring

I Kirken de smaa Billeder

De vendte sig omkring.

Agnete, she stepped  
Through the church door—  
And all the little pictures  
Turned around—  
Around  
In the church, the small pictures  
They turned around.<sup>486</sup>

[29]

Agnete, hun stirred  
Mod Altertavlen hen —  
Og Altertavlen vendte sig, og  
Alteret med den —  
Alt med den  
Sig vendte, hvor hun Øiet  
I Kirken vendte hen.

Agnete, she stared  
Toward the altarpiece—  
And the altarpiece turned  
And the altar with it—  
The altar with it.  
Wherever Agnete looked  
Everything turned within the church.<sup>487</sup>

[30]

Agnete hun stirred  
Paa Stenen for sin Fod,  
Og saae sin Moders Navn, som

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<sup>486</sup> Baggesen, AH, p. 177.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

Paa Ligstenen stod,  
Hvor hun stod —  
Da brast den Armes Hierte,  
Da iisned hendes Blod.

Agnete stared  
At the stone by her foot,  
And saw her mother's name written upon  
The tombstone where she stood,  
Where she stood—  
Then her poor heart broke,  
And her blood turned to ice.<sup>488</sup>

[31]

Agnete, hun raved,  
Hun segnede, hun faldt —  
Nu alle hendes smaa Børn  
De længes overalt —  
Overalt.  
Nu Sønner, som Døttre  
De længes overalt.

Agnete, she raved,  
She staggered, she fell—  
Now all her little children  
Are everywhere yearning—  
Everywhere.  
Now the sons, like the daughters  
Are everywhere yearning.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>488</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid.

[32]<sup>490</sup>

Lad græde, lad længes,  
Lad sørge her og der!  
Lukt er nu hendes Øie,  
Det aabnes aldrig meer —  
Aldrig meer!  
Og knust er hendes Hierte  
Det slaær nu ikke meer.

Let them weep, let them yearn,  
Let them mourn here and there!  
Her eyes are closed—  
They will never open again—  
Never again!  
And broken is her heart  
It will never beat again.<sup>491</sup>

When Agnete crosses the threshold of the church she returns to her persecution. All the little pictures on the wall, presumably saints and other religious icons, turn away at the guilty woman standing before them. In stanza twenty-nine, the altar turns in the opposite direction from Agnete, repelled from her. One can imagine bread and wine sitting on the altar, at once a gesture of welcome and miraculous transformation, now turned stale and flat. Agnete is being

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<sup>490</sup> Cf. Bushby, op. cit., stanza 32:  
Ay! Let them weep, and let them long,  
And seek her o'er and o'er!  
Dark, dark, are now her eyes so bright,  
They ne'er shall open more!  
Oh, never more!  
And crush'd is now that death-cold heart,  
So warm with love before.

<sup>491</sup> Baggesen, AH, p. 179.

wordlessly accused in this once hospitable place. It is almost as if the guilt and pain at the center of her being turns every gesture and threshold of welcome to impenetrable stone.

The altarpiece, too, moves from Agnete. As readers, we are left to wonder what this altarpiece consisted of and if its turning resulted in it turning back around to face Agnete. That everything turned wherever Agnete looked could be interpreted as a continuous turning, a revolving, a turning away again and again. If this were so, perhaps the altarpiece stands out among the other objects, for as the other objects turn away in disgust the altarpiece might perhaps be turning in circles as a recurring reminder of Agnete's circular insanity and the unceasingly repetitious punishment she receives.

In that vein, it is useful to imagine what might be depicted on the altarpiece. It would not be out of the question for it to be in the form of a diptych depicting scenes from Christ's death. Consider Jan van Eyck's diptych (see Artwork 4) where the first panel depicts Christ's crucifixion attended by a large crowd of people with five devastated mourners in the foreground, while the second reveals a horrifying depiction of the Last Judgment where people are seen sinking into the earth and drowning in the sea. A sprawling skeletal figure of death presides over the torturing of the damned. In the context of melancholia, this giant skeleton presiding over the guilty can be interpreted as a haunting symbol for the pathological conscience itself. Likewise, the conscience-as-skeleton is a poignant way to think about the real constitution of the lost-object. From the inside, the melancholic identifies with the loved one who resides in their mind, a faithful memory come to life, but from the outside we can see the real bones of the love-object beneath the artificial skin of the lost-object. In these ways, the spinning altarpiece is like an emergency light flashing on and off signaling the presence of mortal danger.

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Artwork 4

Jan van Eyck, **Crucifixion and Last Judgment diptych**, ca. 1440-41

Oil on canvas, transferred from wood. Each 56.5 cm × 19.7 cm (22.25 in × 7.75 in)

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, United States

Public Domain



Stanza thirty marks a pivotal moment in the final section of the poem. The reader is given a startling piece of new information that allows them to retrospectively see the poem in a completely different light. Agnete looks down by her feet and realizes the stone she is standing on is her mother's tombstone. Thus, the woman Agnete conversed with outside the church was not her mother, alive and concerned, but her ghostly apparition speaking from death about death. For my interpretation of the poem as an allegory of pathological mourning, this detail is the key to unlocking the secret of Agnete's traumatic past. If Agnete's mother is revealed to be already dead when Agnete arrives at the church, and time is revealed to be unreliable in her conversation with the spectre, then it is possible that her mother has been dead the whole time, that is, from the very first line of the poem. Also, it is important that Agnete's ghost-mother is the one to reveal the suicide of Agnete's husband. This moment of solidarity and similarity between mother and son-in-law foreshadows one final revelation of death. Like her mother, it is possible to infer that Agnete's husband has been dead all along too. Just beyond the horizon of these deaths opens a space for the reader to co-create the meaning of the poem, to do the work of imagination and inference, and to read between the lines to discover something so painful it cannot be spoken. Agnete's two daughters, who according to the ghost both "scream and yearn," have long since died and lie buried in the dark earth of the church cemetery.

As Agnete reels from the reminder of her mother's death, her blood turns to ice, and memories crowd in. She raves, staggers, and falls to the ground. In the final moments before her death, her mind is consumed by the unstoppable yearning and weeping of all her children, daughters and sons, real and imaginary, love-objects and lost-objects. In a gesture of self-destruction, she seemingly encourages the cacophony of her children's cries that she knows she has caused. In the final lines of stanza thirty-two, the final stanza of the poem, her heart stops and she dies. The image of her eyes closing forever calls back her beatific dream when she

closed the eyes of her youngest son and gave each small eyelid a tender kiss. In her mania, she imagined his sleep was just a lovely, dream-filled prologue to his waking again, rested and ready to play and laugh and smile. All the while the older boy, the first child, sits at Agnete's feet listening attentively to his mother's song with eyes seeing, ears hearing, nose breathing, and mouth smiling. This blissful scene is now seen for what it is, a manic projection that momentarily stayed the crushing burden of Agnete's daughters' deaths.

The reader is left to imagine what happened to the girls. Was it an accident, an illness, an act of God, neglect, sexual abuse, or were they killed by a stranger? For the purposes of examining the inner workings of pathological mourning it may not matter the cause. As Spargo states, "The melancholic mourner whom Freud describes as taking the burden of loss into the very space of his ego, who perhaps cries aloud, 'I did it, it's my fault,' may mistakenly express her responsibility as though it were a perpetuated action, when all she really means to express is the existential fact of having been at fault insofar as she was unable to prevent harm from befalling another."<sup>492</sup> In either case, as direct or indirect cause or completely missing from the causal chain, Agnete *believes* that her little ones are dead because she failed to keep them alive. By the last line, Agnete is forever robbed of speech as her girls had been. Agnete can no longer beg for forgiveness just as her lost daughters could no longer give it.

The specific circumstances of Agnete's death are perhaps just as mysterious as her children's. If we revisit the opening scene of the poem with the information gleaned from the final scenes of the poem, it is possible to interpret her pensive staring at the sea as pregnant with meaning. Kierkegaard's *Silentio* attributes her turning toward the sea and willingness to go with the merman as a sign that she is "a woman who hankers for 'the interesting,' and one

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<sup>492</sup> Spargo, op. cit., p. 36.

such can always be certain there is a merman in the offing [...].”<sup>493</sup> In contrast, the pathological mourning interpretation provides a more compelling motive given the *full* story of Agnete’s journey towards death. It is possible that her pensiveness represents her inner struggle with melancholia and the urge to break free from it. One can imagine Agnete giving in to mania, taking off her clothes and running into the sea with a feeling of exhilaration as the freezing water touches her skin. As the tide pulls her farther from shore, perhaps the vision of her adventure with the merman and the rushing back to church to wrestle with the ghosts of her past flashes before her eyes. By the end, with the children’s screams echoing in her head, she chooses to die by drowning herself in the sea.

In Freud’s discussion of suicide in *Mourning and Melancholia*, he does not consider the way mania can *intensify* the original melancholia it attempts to deny. As “Agnete From Holmegaard” illustrates, mania can have its own experience of guilt. A prime example is how Agnete creates surrogate sons even as she is compelled to leave them by the pull of reality. In a sense, she is now responsible for failing two sets of children. There is also the possibility that in Agnete’s final moment before drowning and with her manic state fully dissolved, she experiences guilt for ever believing she could escape responsibility or deserve a second chance. It is also the case that when a person suffers a manic episode, they can cause further damage to the relationships in their lives by acting in erratic and confrontational ways, which only becomes clear to the pathological mourner after their episode has run its course. For Agnete, these additional guilty feelings exacerbate the unbearable guilt she was already suffering. In the return to melancholia, the pathological conscience has even more reasons to persecute and punish the self. Taking themselves as their own object, which is guilty of unspeakable crimes and for trying to hide and deny those crimes, the death sentence is enacted. Judge, prosecutor,

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<sup>493</sup> Kierkegaard, FT, p. 121.

defendant, and executioner *all in one* and the evidence of guilt growing and growing—to kill oneself is to kill the hated other they have become. Suicide is homicide.

#### 4.5 Akedah Revisited: Sketch of a New Interpretation

Silentio either feels justified in deliberately leaving out the full scope of Agnete's story or he is unconsciously repressing it. Of course, it is also possible that Kierkegaard deliberately portrays Silentio as ignorant of the story despite its ubiquity in Danish culture and Kierkegaard's own familiarity with it. Either way, Silentio misses out on the opportunity to engage with the Akedah in light of what can be learned from Agnete's life and death. Like Poe's purloined letter, the complete story of Agnete hides in plain sight right below the nose of Kierkegaard's pseudonym.<sup>494</sup> If Kierkegaard identifies with the character of the merman and Silentio concludes that Abraham is significantly different from and superior to the merman, they both miss the possibility that Abraham shares essential characteristics and experiences with Agnete. Paying attention to Agnete is the key to reinterpreting the Akedah as a parable of pathological mourning, which helps to make Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah more understandable even as it provides a new and historically significant text to think through and clarify the complex inner workings of mania and melancholia. I will refer to this new interpretation of the Akedah as the Pathological Mourning interpretation, hereafter abbreviated as the PM interpretation.

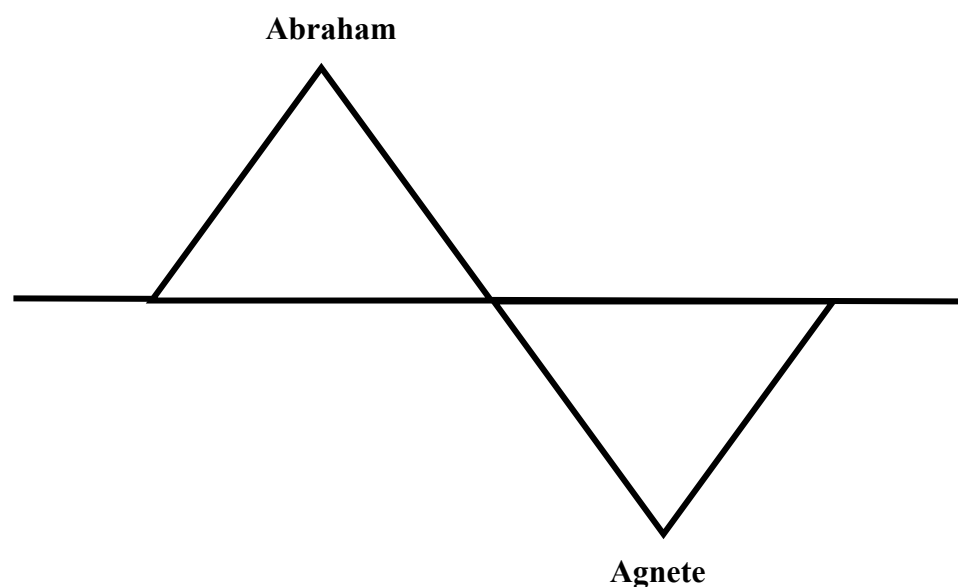
What I want to argue is that the Akedah can be read as a mirror-text to the story of Agnete and the merman, one serving as analogue to the other (see Figure 7). Despite the genders

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<sup>494</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. 327-344.

being reversed and the topography of mania changing from the bottom of the sea to the top of a mountain, the stories are strikingly similar. Both stories can be read as a response to a prior loss. For Agnete, it is the loss of her daughters, husband, and mother, for Abraham it is the loss of his son Ishmael who he shunned and sent into the wilderness, the loss of his child's mother Hagar, and the loss of his wife Sarah.<sup>495</sup> Both Agnete standing on the beach and wading into the water and Abraham standing at the bottom of the mountain taking the first steps of his climb can be interpreted as representing each character's transition from melancholia into mania. The voice of the merman speaking to Agnete and the voice of God speaking directly and indirectly to Abraham both represent the presence of an omnipotent king who urges them on to their remote destinations. Sufferers of mania have been observed to experience delusional religious visions and auditory commands from God.<sup>496</sup> At their farthest remote and at the height of their mania, both Agnete and Abraham are depicted as being alone with their child.

Figure 7: Mirror-texts



<sup>495</sup> *Tanakh*, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>496</sup> Goodwin and Jamison, op. cit., p. 58.

As with Agnete, it is possible to interpret Abraham's love-object to be a child he once had but feels responsible for losing. The *second* child, which for Agnete is the baby son at the bottom of the ocean and for Abraham is Isaac on the mountain top, is ultimately a fantasy that temporarily reverses the intolerable reality of the loss of the first child. As we saw with Agnete, her peak experience of mania involved sitting safely and tranquilly in the merman's sea kingdom as she sings to her new child. For Abraham, it happens in a more complex way. He builds an altar, binds his son Isaac, and raises his knife as if to kill him. He is on the precipice of causing the loss of his new child just as he had done previously with his first child. But this time something miraculous happens—he is interrupted by an angel. Abraham listens and decides to lower his knife. The angel blesses him, and the child is saved from disappearing forever. One can imagine Abraham untying the boy and embracing him with joy and relief. Being an intrapsychic drama in the PM interpretation, the angel can be interpreted as a symbol of Abraham's own troubled mind triumphing over the death of the love-object and thereby destroying the very roots of his guilt.

As with Agnete, this manic triumph is over in an instant. As we saw, in mid-song she starts to become anxious and soon hears the bells of the church, a metonym for all her losses, calling her back to the church and its graveyard. With Abraham, a ram suddenly appears in a nearby thicket interrupting whatever moment he was having with his son. Traditionally, the ram and its sacrifice mark the end of Abraham's terrifying trial and the confirmation of Isaac's safety who is now able to fulfill his role as progenitor of an entire nation of people. In the PM interpretation, the ram represents the opposite trajectory as it signals the reappearance of melancholia. Because of the sacrifice of the ram near the end of the Akedah story, the ceremonial blowing of the shofar, i.e., a ram's horn, is often associated with Abraham's

exemplary faith.<sup>497</sup> But the shofar has many other meanings, some of which can be interpreted as symbols of melancholia. The prime example of this is when the shofar is sounded on Rosh Hashanah in order to “stir our conscience.”<sup>498</sup> In this context, the severed ram’s horn in Abraham’s hand is the symbol of his pathological conscience returning to bloody *him*. In addition to this, the shofar can serve as a reminder of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>499</sup> In the PM interpretation, this can be interpreted as a reminder to Abraham of what he has destroyed and what has been destroyed in him. Every memory of the love-object is a holy relic to the melancholic salvaged from a burnt house or collapsed building. When these memories congeal into the persecuting lost-object, the self becomes more and more convinced of the necessity to self-immolate. Lastly, the shofar can be viewed as a reminder of Judgment Day when the guilty are sentenced to eternal torment. Like Agnete’s spinning altarpiece, the shofar is an unmistakable reminder that Abraham is guilty and can never assuage the torture it causes him. In a related sense, a last judgment for a murderer is sometimes death, and since in the PM interpretation it is Abraham who is judging himself, the shofar is an omen of suicide.

Like Agnete’s husband, Abraham’s wife Sarah dies from grief according to some Midrashic commentators.<sup>500</sup> If Isaac is not real but only a manic projection of Abraham’s in the PM interpretation, then it is possible to see Sarah’s grief in a new light as well. In this reading, Sarah stays barren and her miraculous conception at God’s hand was her own manic fantasy. Her barrenness signifies a two-fold loss, namely, the loss of the child she always desired and imagined would be hers and the loss of her identity as a mother, as a woman. This approach to

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<sup>497</sup> Saadiah Gaon, quoted and summarized in “10 Things the Shofar Symbolizes,” [www.myjewishlearning.com/article/decoding-the-shofar/](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/decoding-the-shofar/), and collected in *Moments of Transcendence: Inspirational Readings for Rosh Hashanah*, ed. Dov Peretz Elkins (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1992).

<sup>498</sup> Ibid.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

<sup>500</sup> “Sarah and the Akedah,” [myjewishlearning.com](http://myjewishlearning.com).

Sarah emphasizes the way arrested time collapses the future and leaves the pathological mourner unable to move forward in their life. Sarah's melancholia, sparked by her inability to have her own child, changes her relationship to the future—she no longer wonders about the possibilities of having children or her own personal happiness. The play *Yerma* (translated as *Barren* in English) depicts this kind of experience in memorable and heartbreaking fashion.<sup>501</sup> The protagonist, simply called “Her” in the play script, struggles to conceive a child throughout the play. In scene three, act nineteen, not long after conceding she will never have a biological child, she experiences a manic flight from reality. She is overly talkative, delusional, and partakes in dangerous acts without any awareness of the harmful consequences to herself or others.<sup>502</sup> In the last scene of the play, she returns to her melancholia now redoubled in strength. As she lay dying from a self-inflicted stab wound, she speaks her final words and the final words of the play:

**3.21**

HER: Oh shit I

John?

I think I

Oh

Oh

Okay

No more wondering

No more wondering

You won't be

Coming

You won't be coming anymore

My son

My daughter

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<sup>501</sup> Simon Stone after Federico García Lorca, *Yerma* (London: Oberon Modern Plays, 2019).

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77-83.

But  
Maybe  
I'll be coming to you

I'll be coming  
To you.<sup>503</sup>

These last words capture an important aspect of arrested time and its connection to suicide. For Her, the repetition of “You won’t be coming” and “You won’t be coming anymore” speaks directly to the loss of her unborn love-object. In her death-throes just before the end of her existence, she has perhaps a manic-like thought of hope that maybe in *her* death she will be coming to the child who *never existed*. The lines could very well have been said by Agnete or Abraham at the height of their despair, though with an important distinction: *you won’t be coming anymore* would refer to the once living child who is never coming back from the dead instead of the non-existent child who will never get to live. That Sarah has no dialogue, plays no role in the Akedah, and dies shortly off stage after the story ends without any explanation or commentary, is a gross lacuna and a missed opportunity to understand and empathize with her own annihilatory sadness. There is yet another interpretation of the shofar that relates directly to Sarah, namely, that the sounding of the shofar is a symbol for Sarah’s tears.<sup>504</sup>

Like Agnete, Abraham is now without spouse or child. He does not fall down dead at the end of the story like Agnete but continues his anti-cathexis of the outside for a time and avoids dealing with Sarah’s burial directly.<sup>505</sup> In his final days, Abraham remarries and has six new children. It is in line with the PM interpretation to interpret these details as yet another descent into mania that restores *all* his traumatic losses and more. When this heightened state

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>504</sup> “Sarah and the Akedah,” myjewishlearning.com.

<sup>505</sup> Zierler, “In Search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah,” op. cit., p 22.

of mania dissolves into an even more powerful melancholia, he finally dies. This would give new and poignant meaning to the translation of Genesis 25:8 that describes Abraham's last act: "Then Abraham gave up the ghost and died [...]." <sup>506</sup>

The mirror-texts of Agnete and Abraham can be mapped onto Vonnegut's shape of stories matrix (see Figure 8). <sup>507</sup> The horizontal line from left to right represents the movement of the story from its beginning (B) to its end (E). The vertical line measures the level of felicity (F) at the top and the level of loss and death (L/D) at the bottom. <sup>508</sup> The stories experienced from *within* the characters' mania have the longer more elaborate shape. The melancholic experience, its own kind of inner narrative that lurks beneath mania, is represented by the much smaller story shape.

Each story begins with their characters in a state of mild felicity as each is situated in a vivid natural setting. In their mania, both characters journey to the height of their beatific vision and felicity. With the appearance of the bells and the ram, the story arc turns downward and plunges back into the pain of melancholia defined by loss and death. In the PM interpretation, this is where the story ends, marked by the X. In some classic stories, the plot would continue past the X, which indicates that what was lost is restored and the characters live happily ever after. This is marked on the graph with an infinity symbol. For example, in the story of Jesus in the New Testament, the pinnacle of the top arch might represent his baptism, attainment of disciples, the success of his teaching, and the blessings of his miracles. The downward slope might indicate his arrest, trial, and execution. The nadir of the bottom arch might represent Christ's descent into hell on Middle Saturday. His resurrection, his vindication as God, and his eternal life as the savior of humanity crescendos at the infinity symbol. In a non-religious text

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<sup>506</sup> *The Holy Bible: King James Version* (Dallas, TX: Brown Books Publishing, 2004).

<sup>507</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 25.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

like the story of Cinderella,<sup>509</sup> the pinnacle of the top arch might be her experience as belle of the ball and gaining the love of the Prince. The nadir of the bottom arch is her return to her terrible life of drudgery and abuse at the hands of her stepmother and sisters after experiencing something so wonderful. The glass slipper fitting, the marriage to the Prince, and a life of love and luxury extending over the rest of her life, is the final upward slope leading to her happily ever after *ad infinitum*. But the X is where the story ends for Agnete and Abraham. Recalling our interpretation of Levinas, in the wake of loss, guilt, and melancholic persecution, there would appear to be no more happy endings for the pathological mourner.

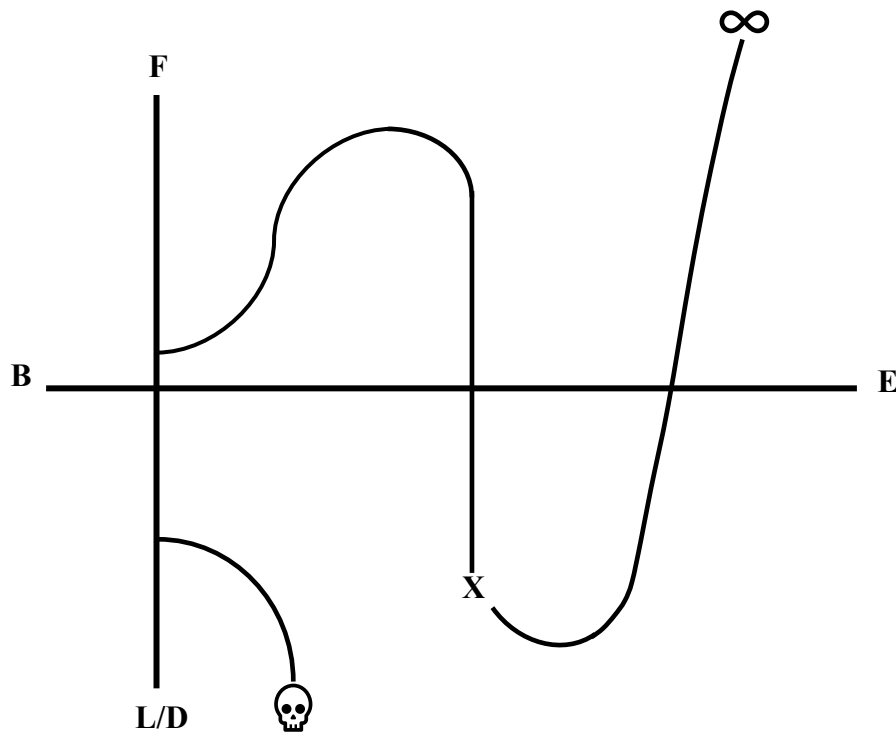
The complexity of the Agnete and Akedah stories in the context of the PM interpretation is exemplified in the overt story shape we just examined, which like a nesting doll harbors a latent story shape with in it, namely, the true shape of the circular movement of mania and melancholia that only spirals downward toward self-destruction despite the feelings of omnipotence and ecstasy. This is represented on the graph as the downward arch that begins far from felicity and deep into the pain of loss and death. As mania initiates its work, the pathological mourner is in reality getting *sicker*. In the end, mania switches over to redoubled melancholia and its downward momentum towards suicide is reached, symbolized by a skull. For Vonnegut, this kind of story shape is illustrated in the writings of Franz Kafka and illuminates the awful deterioration of a human life.<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>509</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

**Figure 8:**  
The Shape of the Story



The PM interpretation of the Akedah, however different from the traditional religious and philosophical interpretations, still engages with them in a meaningful way. Similar to the atonement interpretation, Abraham's experiences of both mania and melancholia ultimately seek to expiate and undo the loss he is guilty of causing. The higher power that exists in Abraham's state of pathological mourning is not God but two versions of himself—the omnipotent one and the punishing one. Regarding the martyrdom interpretation, it is clear that the melancholic version of Abraham is willing to suffer pain and die for the sake of the lost-object.

It can also be argued that Abraham is deglorified in the PM interpretation of the Akedah by moving the focus of the story away from Abraham's success as a faithful servant of God.

But in this kind of deglorification, the point is not to condemn or disqualify Abraham but to understand and empathize with a very human experience. Though deglorified from being the father of faith, he is more understandable and relatable as someone who lives with sadness and remorse at the loss of loved ones. In this way it shows that even Abraham has a breaking point which might provide some solace to other mourners that they are not alone in their suffering. This interpretation also hints at a different way to think about divine power and its ambivalence to the pathological mourner. To paraphrase Aristotle, even this is lacking to a god—to undo the things that have once been done.<sup>511</sup>

The test of obedience interpretation is relevant as well. In the PM interpretation, an essential question hovering over Abraham is not just will he or will he not obey God's command or the angel's directive, but ultimately will he or will he not obey the little voice inside his head, the formidable call of conscience that awaits him at the end of the story. To obey the persecuting lost-object is to suffer and possibly die; to disobey is to take the first step towards healthy mourning and reengagement with the world.

The PM interpretation is also in line with the disaster interpretation. Both argue that a traumatic event pre-exists and greatly influences the course and outcome of the Akedah. In the PM interpretation, the disaster can be named and analyzed as real losses intertwined with the character's identity and fate. The PM interpretation also respects the life and death of Sarah by actively working to better understand her thoughts and feelings and by paying attention to her pain and her voice—strategies of reading that overlap with a Feminist approach to the text. Keeping Ladin's concept of a trans experience in mind, the PM interpretation is in a position to examine the ways in which rigid gender roles and uncritical beliefs surrounding motherhood

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<sup>511</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Williams (Miami, FL: HardPress, 2017), Book VI, Chapter II, p. 154.

and fatherhood contribute to one's self-understanding in relation to the loss of children, both born and unborn.

By denying the full story of Agnete and her mania, Silentio is denying the need for the denial of abnormal grief thereby *underestimating and misunderstanding the problem of guilt*. Silentio admits to falling far short of Abraham as Kierkegaard does with Christ.<sup>512</sup> Guilt and sin are important themes in *Fear and Trembling*, but by suppressing Agnete's experience with pathological mourning, Silentio does not fully engage with the reality and weight of guilt on a human being who feels responsible for the death of their irreplaceable loved one, their child. Agnete helps bring Abraham back to earth by shifting the attention away from an absurd paradox to the reality of a resistant mourning that crucifies the whole self, not just their understanding. Agnete's and Abraham's experiences with unbearable loss and guilt are fully and disturbingly articulated in Levinas' descriptions of substitution and unbridled guilt. His language and analogies are so graphic that he convinces the reader of the dangers of melancholia to devastate and destroy. In Levinas, the other *qua* love-object is lost and returns just as it does for Silentio's Abraham. But the resurrection of substitution is not the joyful acceptance of gaining a finite life back again. Instead, it is the raising of a wraith. In a subtle subversion, Silentio's own words in praise of Abraham can be read as a description of his pathological condition:

There was one who was great in his strength, and one who was great in his wisdom, and one who was great in his hope, and one who was great in his love; but greater than all was Abraham, great with that power whose strength is powerlessness, great in that wisdom whose secret is folly, great in that hope whose outward form is insanity, great in that love which is hatred of self.<sup>513</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> Kierkegaard, FT, p. 62-63.; Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, op. cit., p. 17-19.

<sup>513</sup> Kierkegaard, FT, p. 50.

Abraham, like Agnete, both bind themselves to the very thing they believe to have destroyed. What appears as one thing (hope and love), is truly something else (insanity, self-hatred). Ultimately, for the PM interpretation these stories that appear on the surface as interpsychic dramas are revealed in the end to be intrapsychic parables of pathological mourning.

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud makes an interesting assertion about the pathological mourner. He states:

He also seems justified in certain other accusations; it is merely that he has a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic. When in his heightened self-criticism he describes himself as petty, egoistic, dishonest, lacking in independence, one whose sole aim has been to hide the weaknesses of his own nature, it may be, so far as we know, that he has come pretty near to understanding himself; we only wonder why a man has to be ill before he can become accessible to a truth of this kind.<sup>514</sup>

Like the metaphor of the crucible in the test of obedience interpretation of the Akedah, the illness of melancholia does have a positive function. The extreme wounding of the loss of the love-object together with the heat and pressure from the pathological conscience, burn away the existential mania and absolutisms of everyday life leaving a more accurate picture of a finite creature: vulnerable and imperfect, a dying animal aware of its death and heartbroken by the death of others, neither of which they can ultimately stop or redeem. In an age influenced by social media that provides platforms to create and share filtered simulacra of ourselves and the many uncritical beliefs and values that define us, the self-awareness involved in melancholia provides a brief flicker of honesty, humility, and accountability, as well as a profound expression of love however blackened by guilt. But in pathological mourning, this kind of suffering into truth exists in relation to a suffering toward death. The truths that the melancholic's keen eye sees about themselves are exclusively negative, which means at the same time that its eye is blind to other positive truths, for example, that they might yet have the

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<sup>514</sup> Freud, MM, p. 22.

capacity to love and be loved in different kinds of cathexes, to change and grow in surprising ways they could not have predicted, and perhaps to sublimate their pain and learn from their mistakes even if they can never forgive themselves. These negative truths that Freud emphasizes are important, but in the context of pathological mourning they only serve to further the self-accusations and self-punishments of the melancholic. As I will explore in the next chapter, there might be a third way, however contingent and ephemeral, between the extremes of mania and melancholia that grants access to the painful truths that shape the pathological mourner's life while also *helping* their persecuted, a-cathected self. This third way places the sufferer in a position to establish new connections to the outside, new relationships with others and with language, and to explore the possibility that time's movement toward the future might be restored through the language of poetry and the experience of making poems.

## CHAPTER FIVE | THE TASKS OF POETRY

### 5.1 Defining the Terms of Surrender

*What are poems for?* That is a philosophical question. Some philosophers like Richard Rorty argue that philosophy is a kind of literary art.<sup>515</sup> Conversely, Plato judges poetry to be distinct and inferior to philosophy.<sup>516</sup> But as John Koethe states, “Plato’s opposition to poetry is thus based on a grudging respect for it and a recognition that poetry and philosophy have enough in common for there to be a danger of one being mistaken for the other.”<sup>517</sup> I would argue that philosophy and poetry are similar yet distinct and mutually beneficial endeavors. Part of what philosophy and poetry have in common is that they “dwell together in some mutual astonishment of words.”<sup>518</sup> Put another way, if philosophy begins in wonder over significant questions in the realms of ontology, ethics, and aesthetics, among others, and the concomitant recognition of one’s own ignorance in the face of these questions,<sup>519</sup> then poetry specifically begins in wonder over words and the recognition of one’s own ignorance in relationship to language. In this way, the poet intensifies the philosopher’s awe and focuses her task even as poetry reveals the task to be a never-ending one. Or as Martin Jay puts it referring to the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Our finitude as human beings is encompassed by the infinity of language.”<sup>520</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Poetry* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2016), pp. 43-66.

<sup>516</sup> Plato, *Republic*, op. cit., Books III and X.

<sup>517</sup> John Koethe, *Poetry at One Remove: Essays* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>518</sup> William Meredith, *Poems Are Hard to Read* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 45.

<sup>519</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), Book I, Section 982b.

<sup>520</sup> Martin Jay, *Fin de Siècle Socialism and Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 16.

When I struggle to find the right words, when I am tempted to say that there are no words for what I am experiencing—the somersaults of love, the sublimity of a sunset, the sadness of a funeral, the outrage at an injustice—I assume that *language* has not failed me but that *I* have failed as a language user. As James Conlon puts the matter, “I had struggled with my own poetry enough to realize that ‘There are no words’ was most often a way of avoiding the work of finding them, or evading the truth that I did not have the talent to create them.”<sup>521</sup> To *surrender* in this context means to admit that one is guilty of failing at language in these ways. If hubris in philosophy is the sin of *overestimating* one’s abilities and knowledge, then ineffability in poetry is the sin of *underestimating* language’s scope and reach to describe and interpret the full range of human experience—if only we possess the fortitude and passion for words.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* contains definitions of over 600,000 words with each one possessing sprawling histories and multiple meanings totaling in the millions.<sup>522</sup> In a way, each word is a poem that invites a person to think, to imagine, and to follow their curiosity.<sup>523</sup> Where philosophy and poetry dovetail is in their earnest *paying attention to language*: to the polysemy and ambiguity of words and ordered statements, to language’s potential to illuminate and redeem, and in its vulnerability to be misunderstood and misused. Another intersection of philosophy and poetry is literary criticism, which is the result of applying the method of philosophy to analyze, interpret, and better understand literary art.

Here is an example of this intersection that illustrates how we can construct meaning from experience, how we can pay attention to language, and how we might begin to redeem our

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<sup>521</sup> James Conlon, “Against Ineffability,” *Forum Philosophicum: International Journal for Philosophy*, volume 15, no. 2, (Autumn 2010): p. 382.

<sup>522</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, “About,” OED.com.

<sup>523</sup> Blanchot writes, “One must always wonder, as Paulhan suggested, why a word is always more than a word.” *The Writing of the Disaster*, op. cit., p. 96.

abuse of it so that we fail language, and each other, a little less. Consider the opening lines of an untitled Eileen Myles poem:

I always put my pussy  
in the middle of trees  
like a waterfall  
like a doorway to God  
like a flock of birds  
I always put my lover's cunt  
on the crest  
of a wave  
like a flag  
that I can  
pledge my  
allegiance  
to. Here is my  
country.<sup>524</sup>

In one context, the words “pussy” and “cunt” are used to objectify a woman by reducing her dynamic identity to a body part that is treated as a mere means to a man’s pleasure. To understand the word *woman* in this way is to do violence to it, and to act on that understanding is to do real-world harm to women. The physical and emotional violence *flows* from the conceptual violence in the prejudiced mind—the misuse of words. Here is how Myles finishes the poem:

I always put  
my pussy in the middle  
of trees  
like a waterfall  
a piece of jewelry  
that I wear  
on my chest

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<sup>524</sup> Eileen Myles, “I always put my pussy...,” *I Must Be Living Twice: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Ecco Press, 2015), p.150.

like a badge  
in America  
so my lover & I  
can be safe.<sup>525</sup>

The morality and the magic of this poem is its use of synecdoche, a poetic technique that names a part of something to refer to the whole of it. In this way, Myles subverts the sexual objectification of women—redeeming themselves and their beloved from the violent use of words—by *reversing the direction* of how “pussy” and “cunt” are normally used. In the poem, those words are used synecdochically to reference Myles’ beloved partner, to praise the whole person that they are: “My lover’s pussy... / is happy / has a sense of humor / has a career... / meditates... / knows my face... / knows her mind.”<sup>526</sup> In the poem, the beloved’s humanity is restored and kept safe from misconception and misogyny. Poetry, among other things, is the art of choosing the best words and placing them in the best order to say something that must be said. In a lyric poem like Myles’, “[the poem] speaks from the poet as individual to the reader as another individual, and intends to establish a limited, intense agreement of feeling.”<sup>527</sup> By so doing, it delights, informs, and has the potential to transform the heartbeat inside the wound into a signifying scar.

I would argue that Myles’ poem can be interpreted as an appropriation of and response to Marcel Duchamp’s last artwork, the life-size installation piece titled, *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d’eau, 2. Le gaz d’éclairage...*, which in English translates to *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas...* (see Artwork 5).<sup>528</sup> *Given* explores the theme of *how to kill the thing you love*, the very seed of melancholia itself. It forces the viewer to look through two small holes set at eye-level in a pair of antique wooden doors, effectively creating a peephole as the

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<sup>525</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

<sup>527</sup> Meredith, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>528</sup> Janis Mink, *Duchamp 1887-1968: Art as Anti-Art* (Köln: Taschen, 2016), pp. 84-89.

sole access to the tableau that lies beyond the locked threshold. What awaits the voyeur is a nude female figure lying on her back in a bramble, holding a lamp. The body rests on an angled vertical axis with the legs spread closer to the viewer while the face in the middle distance is obstructed by the remains of a brick wall. The background is a pastoral scene containing an elevation of trees and the presence of water moving through it above and beyond the body.

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Artwork 5

Marcel Duchamp, *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas...*, 1946-1966. Interior view.  
7 feet 11 1/2 inches × 70 inches × 49 inches (242.6 × 177.8 × 124.5 cm)

Mixed media assemblage: (exterior) wooden door, iron nails, bricks, and stucco; (interior) bricks, velvet, wood, parchment over an armature of lead, steel, brass, synthetic putties and adhesives, aluminum sheet, welded steel-wire screen, and wood; pegboard, hair, oil paint, plastic, steel binder clips, plastic clothespins, twigs, leaves, glass, plywood, brass piano hinge, nails, screws, cotton, collotype prints, acrylic varnish, chalk, graphite, paper, cardboard, tape, pen ink, electric light fixtures, gas lamp

(Bec Auer type), foam rubber, cork, electric motor, cookie tin, and linoleum  
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of the Cassandra Foundation, 1969-41-1

© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP  
Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp



The title of the artwork, *Given*, signifies on at least three levels. The first is how the artwork operates on perception. Because of the constraints set up by Duchamp (peephole, locked doors, brick wall), the viewer is only offered one adumbration of a scene where a crucial detail, the woman's face, is left out of view. Because of this lack of access, we do not know if she is alive or dead, experiencing pleasure or pain, looking toward the human viewer or away at the trees, forming a word with her mouth or disturbingly slack-jawed. What is given is complicated by what is not given.<sup>529</sup> A definitive, all-encompassing description of the artwork is suspended even as the viewer is invited to imagine what is left out just beyond their perceptual gaze.

This invitation to imagine and think leads the viewer into the second level of signification. Thinking itself, conceiving, is not reducible to the passive reception of perceptible data. Even if the doors were to open and we were allowed to step past the brick wall to examine every angle of the body to form a complete picture, we would still be lacking something essential to the human *qua* integral whole. Put another way, an autopsy cannot capture the human capacities for rational and emotional intelligence, for innovative language use, for free action in the forms of hope, desire, and rebellion that can shape a person in unforeseen ways. A human *subject* cannot be fully circumscribed as a perceptual *object*.<sup>530</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 195-225.

<sup>530</sup> Another relevant distinction here is the difference between the work of imagination and the work of fancy. Though both terms are polysemous, one way to conceive of them is that imagination pictures things as they were (in memory), as they are (in mental representations of perceptual data), and even beyond us as they might otherwise be (through novel combination and connection); fancy, on the other hand, fantasizes about things that are not and could never be or should never be: zombies, vampires, and the monstrous idea that women are two-dimensional sex objects to be possessed and posed. Fantasy is, in this conception, pure escape from reality, while imagination is potentially exodus—a tool for forward thinking that recognizes where we have been and what we might change to extend the boundaries of what is possible. Cf. Critchley *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the poetry of Wallace Stevens*, (London and New York: Routledge Publishers, 2005), p. 11.

With this distinction in mind, it is possible to interpret the artwork as a murder scene where the body has been *posed* by the killer to *imitate agency* where in fact it has been utterly destroyed—an example of dehumanization *par excellence*. Posing, as a category of forensic criminal analysis, denotes when a murder scene is altered for the sole purpose of serving the fantasy of the killer.<sup>531</sup> Tellingly, both Jack the Ripper and the Black Dahlia killer posed their female victims with the legs spread as Duchamp has done here.<sup>532</sup> Posing is also a compelling metaphor for the work of substitution and identification that occurs in melancholia. The love-object, now dead and drained of all subjectivity and agency, has been reappropriated as the newly installed lost-object, which is now posed to imitate the once living beloved other. The fact that the melancholic believes themselves to have killed their love makes the scene of substitution a murder scene.

The third level of signification moves beyond interpreting the artwork as a posed murder scene to a critical reflection on the inner workings and terrible consequences of the male fantasy of female beauty and the fantasies inherent in pathological mourning. Put another way, *Given* gives the gifts of reflective distance and the provocation to ponder a pervasive phenomenon in life and art, namely, how and why someone can figuratively or literally kill the thing they love by first failing at language.

I would argue there is a structural analogy between Levinas' interpretation of the human face as the site of responsibility and the *face of the word*.<sup>533</sup> Levinas describes the face as follows:

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<sup>531</sup> Vernon Geberth, "Frequency of Body Posing in Homicides," *Law and Order*, 10 February, Hendonpub.com/resources/article\_archive/results/details?id=1866.

<sup>532</sup> Edward Jay Epstein, *The Annals of Unsolved Crime* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2013). pp. 139-143 and 151-154.

<sup>533</sup> Levinas' own engagement with language in *Otherwise than Being* and other writings from the 1970's orbits around the complex interactions between what he terms the Saying and the Said. Insofar as the Saying exceeds what can be said and even exceeds being itself, it is a term that appears to be interlaced in Levinas' textual web of concepts that exist at the very core of his philosophy and

The approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility. As such, the fact of the other is verticality and uprightness; it spells a relation of rectitude. The face is not in front of me but above me; it is the other before death, looking through and exposing death. [...] Thus, the face says to me: you shall not kill. [...] My ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world, within the ontology of sameness.<sup>534</sup>

Analogously, a person's relationship to language can be interpreted as a mode of personal responsibility. The face of the word symbolizes the site of a word's potential for polysemy and modulation, for exponential shifts of meaning in ever evolving contexts expressing its own kind of transcendence. In this way, the word stands in a vertical position above any person's current usage—transcending the attempt to monopolize any one meaning over the others. This monopolization *qua* oversimplification of a word's polysemous nature represents the wounding and killing of the word. The word is “de-faced”<sup>535</sup> in this way, which acts as the progenitor for other kinds of disfigurement so disturbingly symbolized in Francis Bacon's infamous portraits

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approach to ethics: substitution, responsibility, obsession, accusation, hostage, and election, all of which contain elements circulating between them and that sometimes seem to collapse into one another. Saying, like these other intimately connected concepts, functions “against [one's] will” (OTB p. 11) and “precedes every decision” (BPW p. 103) leaving the person with no escape from the utter “passivity of exposure to suffering and trauma” (OTB p. 189) that underlies responsibility for the other. That Saying precedes every saying of the Said and is never exhausted in the Said (OTB p. 46) “conveys the infinite” (BPW p. 118).

For Levinas, the Said is a polysemous term that indicates the workings of the “the linguistic system” (BPW p.112) and “it is through the *already Said* that words, elements of a historically constituted vocabulary, will come to function as signs and acquire a usage” (OTB p. 37). Given the nature of my thesis, it is tempting to reinterpret Saying as something apart from words said in communication to the living other. The Saying of the pathological mourner is the attenuated speech that flows in a circle between the introjected object that incessantly accuses and the ego that adopts the language of self-degradation. This would be a kerygma without an audience attesting to the truth of pain.

My analysis of the language of poetry is ultimately a project that fits squarely within the ontic sphere of persons deciding to pay attention to the unfolding of words over time through the reading, writing, and sharing of poems. If there is an infinitude to conceptualize in my discussion of the language of poetry, then it is a contingent potential infinity in relation to human beings playing with words indefinitely into the future and not a transcendental infinity that binds a person to the “*absolutely Other*,” holy or otherwise (BPW pp. 12 and 19).

<sup>534</sup> Richard Kearney, *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 189.

<sup>535</sup> Cf. Levinas, RTB, p. 246.

that injure its faces<sup>536</sup> and in Duchamp's *Given* where the nude's face is removed altogether. It is precisely here where Myles' poem finds its counterpointed voice to sing their song of love—a song sung both to their beloved and to language itself. Myles' beloved is placed up in a tree as opposed to Duchamp's woman who is placed in a thicket on the ground; Myles' beloved is placed in a waterfall while Duchamp's woman is placed on dry ground out of reach of the idyllic waterfall above and behind her; Myles' beloved's dynamic identity is protected in and through language while Duchamp's woman is posed corpselike, de-faced, and forever silent. The poet hears<sup>537</sup> and heeds the call to let words live in their full range of signification and metaphoricity which is their responsibility as a lover of language and a lover of human beings whose lives are encompassed and measured by language.<sup>538</sup> For the poet, every word counts and the creating, counting, measuring, and studying of language lasts forever.

Shannon Franklin's artwork titled *Object* (see Artwork 6), a three-tiered rock-like installation that supports a grasping hand while small but significant objects lie below it out of its reach, is both a compelling and creative representation of thwarted female agency and an important exploration of guilt's causes and consequences at the intersection of language and life.<sup>539</sup>

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<sup>536</sup> Luigi Ficacci, *Francis Bacon 1909-1992: Deep Beneath the Surfaces of Things* (Köln: Taschen, 2015), p. 71. Cf. De Riedmatten, op. cit., p. 114-133.

<sup>537</sup> Besides form and analogy, tone is considered one of the central features of any poem. In one of its many senses, tone can be understood as the "expression on the *face* of the word" in all its registers. Thus, the poet who is attuned to the shifts in the tones of words that stretch in different directions reveals their attitude toward language, toward the poem, and toward the reader. In this sense, it could be said the one who is guilty of misusing words by defacing them is figuratively tone-deaf. Willard Spiegelman, *How to Read and Understand Poetry* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 1999), CD 1.

<sup>538</sup> As Toni Morrison states in her Nobel Lecture in Literature: "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we *do* language. That may be the measure of our lives." *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), p. 107.

<sup>539</sup> On one interpretation, it is as if the hand stands in a synecdochic relationship to the pathological mourner who reaches out from its earthly grave and ice prison, not in resurrection, but in desperation and surrender. Its nihilism that *nothing* exists outside their tenuous grasping for and by the lost-object *that it is* has led to its embodied solipsism, namely, that the melancholic exists totally alone in a world they are responsible for emptying. What Franklin maps with tactile precision as a rock-like tomb might also be imagined as "an inclined beach sliding toward a dreadful sea." Either way, the hand's



Artwork 6  
Shannon Franklin, *Object*, 2018  
4' tall, 6'4" wide, and 3'6" deep  
Plaster, wood, and urethane foam  
Private Collection  
Photo courtesy of the artist

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guilt is *apocalyptic*. See David Foster Wallace, "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*," *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013), pp. 77-78.

As in Myles' poem, the hand in Franklin's piece has a range of synecdochical registers. The hand is both severed from its body and removed from its context, yet it evokes "in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections within the recipient" that "feels sudden and percussive, like the venting of a long-stuck valve."<sup>540</sup> The hand, at once an accomplished rendering of the hand that raped Proserpina in Bernini's masterwork (see Artwork 7), also brings to mind the dismemberment of Orpheus at the hands of the maenads. Pausanias conjectures that Orpheus may have actually committed suicide by his own hand over the grief and guilt of losing his beloved Eurydice to the Underworld because of his own acknowledged failure, namely, he lost faith and looked back.<sup>541</sup> According to the artist, *Object* explores the defacements involved in the language of sexism, racism, and classism.<sup>542</sup> *Object* also stages the heartbreaking scene of the *aftermath* of these defacements—the consequences of linguistic, conceptual, and real-world violence turned outwards toward the world and inwards toward the victimizing male hand itself.

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Artwork 7

Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Rape of Proserpina*, 1621-1622, marble  
Rome, Italy, Galleria Borghese  
Public Domain

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<sup>540</sup> David Foster Wallace, "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed," *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2006), p. 61.

<sup>541</sup> Pausanias, op. cit., pp. 301-307.

<sup>542</sup> If the tiered layers of sedimentation are interpreted as the racist, classist, and sexist history of oppressive practices that hold up the grasping hand, then the rock-like structure simultaneously crushes a woman beneath it. The power of imagination, the poetic impulse to play with language, the artistic impulse to shape our fears and desires, make it possible to scale the sheer rock wall of prejudice and its abuse of language or blow a hole through it. Put another way, if the violence of prejudice is a mountain range of pain running through human history, endlessly dividing people from each other and dividing us from who we could become, then the artwork, the poem—the place where words live—is a hidden door in the forbidding rock.



Perhaps the most poignant detail of Franklin's *Object* is the inclusion of a single phrase inscribed on an apple (see Artwork 8) scattered far below the outstretched hand that states, τῇ καλλίστῃ (*tei kallistei*), which means *to the most beautiful*.<sup>543</sup> The act of conceptualization is a kind of grasping and seizing. Perhaps the severed hand is the grasping concept and the carved apple a symbol of that which lies beyond it—both the human face and the face of the word, waiting to be written and re-written again and again. Perhaps *this* is what is most beautiful—that the hand cannot enclose itself around beauty or make a final judgment about it. As soon as it does, it loses the words coming out of the future to astonish, enlighten, and extend the horizon of the concept.<sup>544</sup> As soon as it does, it finds itself guilty of failing language and people—a guilt that may initiate the destructive work of melancholia or the delusion of mania that covers over and resists this guilt because it is absurdly certain that the meaning it possesses is the only meaning possible.

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 Artwork 8  
 Shannon Franklin, *Object, His Trophy (Apple)* detail, 2018  
 Plaster, wood, and urethane foam  
 4' tall, 6'4" wide, and 3'6" deep  
 Private Collection  
 Photo courtesy of the artist

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<sup>543</sup> Martin West, *Greek Epic Fragments: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 80-81.

<sup>544</sup> As Bruns states, "The principle is that the extension of any concept cannot be closed by a frontier. [...] *The poem forces us to expand our boundaries of what we think of as meaningful.*" Gerald Bruns, *The Material of Poetry: Sketches for a Philosophical Poetics* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 27.



John Berger notes, “To break the silence of events, to speak of experience however bitter or lacerating, to put into words, is to discover the hope that these words may be heard [...]”<sup>545</sup> And he concludes, “Poetry is addressed to language itself.”<sup>546</sup> How? The poem laments the loss of words even as it stutters and stumbles on new words to continue the labor of *reassembling what has been scattered*.<sup>547</sup> The divided mind and shattered identity of the pathological mourner is in need of new words and new voices to hear that can begin the work of suturing the self, initiating fresh cathexes, and revealing new modes of thinking, feeling, and imagining that might slow the spinning of melancholia into mania and back again.

I would argue that poetry is the best suited form of literary art to extend the boundaries of existing words, to invent new words, and to inventory the ever-evolving meanings of words common and obscure. A poem can potentially provide order to disorder and disorder to order. The poem can stay confusion even as it submerges the poet and reader in polysemy, ambiguity, indirection, and endless imaginative possibilities. Perhaps most importantly for the pathological mourner, the poem can create a brief, intense agreement of feeling that makes a person feel a little less alone. The hyper-cathexed melancholic might begin to sense the stirrings of a new cathexis on the outside. In the creation of the poem, the recuperated face of the word flows from the wounded self to the face of another who, by receiving, reading, imagining, and wrestling with what is said and not said, co-creates the meaning of the poem providing confirmation that the poet exists and that they can be related to. Just as important, the reader can discover meanings of the poem that the poet themselves did not consider. Seeing one’s own words in a new light can create a shift in thinking.

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<sup>545</sup> John Berger, “The Hour of Poetry,” *Selected Essays*, ed. Geoff Dyer (New York: Vintage International, 2001), p. 452.

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*

There is a poem of mine collected in Chapter 6 titled, “Surrender,” which went into the world with one particular meaning I had intended but, thanks to an astute reader, returned to me with an entirely different meaning. In the poem I attempt to think through a crude analogy, namely, as a maimed limb requires a prosthetic to function again, the pathological mourner’s mind needs poetry as a *figurative* prosthetic to move through its grief and unrelenting guilt. Here is the poem in full:

The poem—  
prosthesis for someone  
who’s lost his mind  
hides the quiet  
of her never-coming-back:  
bruised-black, bled-white,  
the lines on the page.  
His upturned heart’s  
soon a ruin  
without it. Still  
there are propinquities: a close  
reading of her last email  
before she drowned herself  
hurts the same every time. Still  
the dead are dead, and the rest  
go limping on without him. Guilt,  
like water, works under and washes away  
the ground. His mind, like a clefted nub  
of stretched red skin,  
keeps reaching  
for the words...

O Reader,  
please look into my tired face.  
Can’t you see  
this is me  
with my hands up?

I would argue that many lyric poems in general and my own poems in particular exist somewhere on a spectrum between a song and a scream. The two-stanza structure of “Surrender” is intended to put two experiences of the melancholic self in tension with each other by having the second stanza undercut and complicate the first. In the first stanza there is a third-person description of a pathological mourner who is trying but struggling to sublimate his pain through the creation of a poem. The quasi-omniscient opening lines state how this might be possible. As writer, in the first stanza I am following my curiosity and playing with the central analogy—poem-as-prosthesis—in order to explore one of the possible tasks of poetry, namely, to help the pathological mourner begin to move again. The states of arrested time and narcissistic solipsism inherent in the melancholic’s experience keep the mourner continually frozen in one time and place, feeling the same thing, and speaking the attenuated language of guilt and punishment.

In the first stanza, “his” divided mind traumatized and fissured by loss, grief, and guilt, is compared to the *permanent* disfigurement of an appendage. This recognizes that there is no getting over or moving on from traumatic loss; moving and moving on are two distinct experiences. The last two lines of stanza one describe the demanding work of searching for words, which the protagonist is undertaking *ad infinitum*, hence the ellipsis concluding the stanza. The words he is reaching and searching for, the words of the poem to be written and read, are the ones whose faces speak in response to his tender care; they are the words that give meaning to those who pay attention to language while simultaneously exceeding the grasp of any one person’s hand. At the same time, this poetic effort begins to combat the de-faced words that consume the inner dialogue of the pathological mourner while also giving them practice detecting and resisting future de-facements.

The poem holds these faces, these words, together as a monument to the possibility of genuine communication and connection. The poem, like an artificial limb, is in its own small way the fragile artifice that does the work of stabilizing and mobilizing the pathological mourner. In this context, to move might mean cultivating cathexes, but it also might mean being able to get out of bed, take a shower, and eat something. It might mean the ability to let the lungs move by taking deep, slow breaths.

In the second stanza, the poem shifts from the third person to a first-person perspective. The diction is more direct and efficient. The use of apostrophe in the first line is a technique to communicate directly to the reader who was not present at the time of writing and who remains absent from the poet who is left to wonder if their missive has been received and understood. And yet, the absent reader invoked by the use of apostrophe might actually exist or might still be coming out of the future. Aware of this painful tension between narcissistic solipsism and the possibility of cathexis, the “O” evokes a screaming mouth that is desperate to speak and be spoken to by a compassionate other and is panicked this will never happen despite the existence of the poem. In what might be an example of a performative contradiction, the image of the “me” putting their hands up in the air signifies surrender to their persecutor and an admission of their guilt—look at me, I confess, I did it—even as they take the time to write this poem down in an attempt to sublimate their pain, gain some reflective distance from their pathology, and re-cathect with other people. The raised arms symbolize the real possibility of giving in and giving up, of letting the melancholic mourner offer themselves up as a sacrifice to their pathological conscience, to their lost-object, adding another body to the murder scene.

In a strikingly different interpretation of the poem brought to my attention by a reader, the “hands up” were interpreted to be arms raised in victory or celebration, which they

compared to the moment in the film *Shawshank's Redemption*<sup>548</sup> when the protagonist finally escapes from prison and, in the pouring rain, raises his arms in triumph and surrenders to joy and the possibility of a real future. This interpretation had not crossed my mind in the writing of the poem. This kind of paying attention to language by the reader, which helped to fuel an invaluable dialogue and further a friendship, shifted my point of view and allowed me to see a part of myself through another person's eyes. They saw something I could not see. They showed care for me by caring about my poem, letting each face on each word speak their wondrous complexity and multiplicity, which surprised me and reoriented me to the language spoken from my own mouth. It also gave further credence to the idea that *one and the same poem* can both disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed allowing both possibilities to meaningfully co-exist.

## 5.2 The Praxis of Poetry, The Work of Mourning

LOTUS Legal Clinic is a nonprofit organization that provides free comprehensive legal services and educational empowerment programming for survivors of sexual violence and human trafficking across the state of Wisconsin.<sup>549</sup> In my capacity as Director of Survivor Empowerment at LOTUS, I oversee two programs aimed to provide educational and therapeutic experiences for survivors, namely, Untold Stories and Rise & Thrive.

Rise & Thrive is a program for alums of Untold Stories to continue their creative writing and to explicitly express their experiences and understandings of peace, joy, and thriving in the

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<sup>548</sup> Castle Rock Entertainment presents, Columbia Pictures Corporation, produced by Niki Marvin, screenplay by Frank Darabont, directed by Frank Darabont. *The Shawshank Redemption* (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004).

<sup>549</sup> See, [www.lotuslegal.org](http://www.lotuslegal.org).

aftermath of sexual trauma. In the first iteration of Rise & Thrive, clients choose a photograph they have personally taken of a natural landscape or seascape that has a positive connotation and is significant to them. Then they attend writing workshops that I facilitate where they write an ekphrastic poem describing the photograph and the symbolism behind it. The photos are then given to a landscape painter who spends several months creating artworks inspired by the photographs. At the end of the program, the poems, photos, and paintings are published in a magazine and exhibited to the public. In the second instantiation of Rise & Thrive, survivors worked with a filmmaker to create short films of them reading their poems coupled with time-lapse footage of the artist painting their landscape or seascape from start to finish symbolizing the process of creation that is both fluid and adaptive. These films were then unveiled at a virtual community showcase event.

The Untold Stories program includes trauma-informed creative writing workshops, response artworks and art exhibitions, poetry readings, and a literary art magazine that publishes the writings of survivors. The program begins with an intensive writing workshop lasting twelve hours split over two consecutive days.<sup>550</sup> There are several follow-up workshops to discuss and polish the writings that emerged from the first workshops. The finished writings are then given to a professor at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design who dedicates a credit-bearing college-level course specifically designed for the Untold Stories program that helps students learn about survivors and their stories and explore how art therapy can be helpful as a response to trauma. Each student creates an artwork in the medium of their choice that responds directly to one of the survivor-writings. At the end of the course, the response artworks and survivor-writings are published and exhibited side by side. At a community showcase, artists and

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<sup>550</sup> The workshop provides in-person and virtual on-call therapists during the entire extent of the workshop experience and for some time after, providing both talk and art therapy to assist clients in the processing of overwhelmingly painful thoughts and feelings.

survivors get to meet and writers have the opportunity to read their poems. The Untold Stories exhibition of artworks and poems travels to schools and is the centerpiece of the National Crime Victims' Rights ceremony at the state Capitol in Madison, Wisconsin.

In part of the Untold Stories creative writing workshop, I focus on the experiences of anxiety, depression, and arrested time that can affect survivors of sexual trauma and gender-based violence. In some cases, clients are overwhelmed with guilt and shame. Like Levinas' conception of hyperbolic responsibility, some clients feel responsible for their abusers' persecution and abuse; some feel guilty for not protecting a sibling or friend from the same trauma they received. In most cases the painful feelings of shame and guilt and memories of past trauma become so intrusive they monopolize the survivor's mind distracting them from daily tasks and distancing them from others. Many clients report being stuck in their lives. For these reasons, I developed a writing prompt that attempts to acknowledge and engage with these pathologies while letting the client practice moving through time and connecting with others.

I call this prompt, "Time Travel Collage: Getting Unstuck."<sup>551</sup> Before I give out the prompt to participants, we have a brief discussion around the following talking points: 1) Survivors of sexual trauma often feel stuck in their lives because they are stuck in the past, tethered to an overwhelmingly painful experience that continues to interrupt their daily lives in the present. 2) Survivors of sexual trauma often suffer bouts of depression. Depressives sometimes lose their sense of wonder and curiosity about the future—they are certain nothing good will come out of the future for them—only more pain and disappointment. 3) This prompt is an exercise for helping survivors of sexual trauma get unstuck by allowing them to use their

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<sup>551</sup> This exercise is partly inspired by Christopher Castellani's writing exercise in "Nothing But the Truth," *Naming the World and Other Exercises for the Creative Writer*, ed. Bret Anthony Johnston (New York: Random House, 2007), Kindle, location 285.

imaginations and memory to *move in and out of time*: past, present, future, and even to step outside of time by contemplating eternal sounding truths.

We then read and discuss Jericho Brown's poem, "Duplex," to observe how he incorporates firsts and lasts, memories of the past, and timeless sounding truths. We also pay attention to his creative choices for shaping his poem: the flow, the structure (unrhymed couplets), the indented stanzas, the analogies, and the repetition of words and phrases. Here is Brown's short poem in full:

A poem is a gesture toward home.  
It makes dark demands I call my own.

Memory makes demands darker than my own:  
My last love drove a burgundy car.

My first love drove a burgundy car.  
He was fast and awful, tall as my father.

Steadfast and awful, my tall father  
Hit hard as a hailstorm. He'd leave marks.

Light rain hits easy but leaves its own mark  
Like the sound of a mother weeping again.

Like the sound of my mother weeping again,  
No sound beating ends where it began.

None of the beaten end up how we began.  
A poem is a gesture toward home.<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>552</sup> Jericho Brown, *The Tradition* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2019). p. 18.

In one sense, the dark demands of the poem consist in its unrestrained potential to engage with memory and the painful truths it houses through language, imagery, and tropes that reveal new ways to speak and think about the very thing that contributes to the melancholic's paucity of words, its obsessive yet limited language of self-recrimination repeating in an endless cycle. This applies to the reader just as much as it does the writer in the sense that the poem provides an opportunity for the reader to broaden their experience of language and to speak and think differently about the point of view and experiences of the writer by seeing through their sight. The reader's own paucity of words regarding victims of sex trafficking and sufferers of severe mental illness, for example, might be the result of ignorance, indifference, latent bias, or outright prejudice, but the poem has the potential to change a person's relationship to language which in turn can change a person's relationship with the world and the diversity of people who dwell there. Byron offers a small glimpse into the power of a poem's reach despite it being such a small artifact made of mere words. He writes:

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,  
Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces  
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think;  
'Tis strange, the shortest letter which man uses  
Instead of speech, may form a lasting link  
Of ages; to what straits old Time reduces  
Frail man, when paper—even a rag like this,  
Survives himself, his tomb, and all that's his.<sup>553</sup>

In the context of workshop, this experience of writing poems that engage the future while reckoning with the past is something *chosen* by the participant, which is a choice to create through the singularity of their voice. To choose the poem, as Brown puts it, is to choose something that makes dark demands on a person *they can call their own*. In terms of the

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<sup>553</sup> Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, eds. T.G. Steffan, E. Steffan, and W.W. Pratt (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), Kindle, location 2218.

demands of creating literary art, Johnston states, “I really do believe with very few exceptions, if any exceptions, that writing is *the* most difficult thing we’ll *choose* to do. I think that we will do things that are more difficult, we’ll endure more hardship, but I don’t think we’re going to seek those out the way we choose to write.”<sup>554</sup> To choose the poem is to accept the work of suffering involved in creating a space of vulnerable encounter with language and with the other person. I would argue as Johnston does,<sup>555</sup> that this has nothing to do with judgment. On the contrary, it has something to do with “work as play...of figuring out that not all paradoxes have to be paralyzing.”<sup>556</sup> I would also argue that Wallace’s ideas about the function of fiction increases in intensity when applied to the writing of poems generally, but even more so to the writing of poems by survivors of sexual violence and pathological mourners. Keeping this distinction in mind and substituting Wallace’s use of the word “fiction” with “poetry,” the following could be said of poetry’s dark demands and the possible rewards that ensue from committing to these demands:

Writing [poems] becomes a way to go deep inside yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don’t want to see or let anyone else see, and this stuff usually turns out (paradoxically) to be precisely the stuff all [poets] and readers share and respond to, *feel*. [Poetry] becomes a weird way to countenance yourself and to tell the truth instead of being a way to escape yourself or present yourself in a way you figure will be maximally likable. This process is complicated and confusing and scary, and also hard work [...]. The fact that you can now sustain...writing [poems] only by confronting the very same...parts of yourself you’d first used writing to avoid or disguise is another paradox, but this one *isn’t a bind at all*. What it is is a gift, a kind of miracle [...].<sup>557</sup>

For the melancholic, the dark demands of the poem are always vulnerable to the even darker demands of their own memory that manifests through the distorting image of the lost-

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<sup>554</sup> Interview with Bret Anthony Johnston, see Addendum A.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

<sup>556</sup> Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not*, op. cit., p. 198.

<sup>557</sup> Ibid. *Italics Mine*.

object, itself a Frankenstein-like amalgamation of severed moments from the past stitched into the self's identity. What Brown's poem illustrates in an acute yet indirect way, is the possibility of taking the abusive marks from a traumatic past which left an impact on him and his mother that *never dissolved* like droplets of rain on concrete, and writing them down as *marks on the page* in the poem. What comes of this particular encounter with poetry and its markings cannot be determined in advance. If the poem is a *gesture* (Latin *gestūra*, from *gerēre*, which means to carry) towards a kind of refuge as Brown suggests, then is it also a simple *carrying*—of the body, of the face weighted down by skin and scars, skin that forever leaves the body exposed to what wounds it, but also its breath, the “inspiration and expiration, the diastole and systole of the heart beating softly against the lining of one's own skin.”<sup>558</sup> This kind of poetic carrying and its concomitant *carrying beyond* of metaphor,<sup>559</sup> however brief and fleeting, materializes in the poem that carries the writer who carries the weight of their traumatic past. This carrying might be likened to Lepautre's sculpture of Aeneas fleeing from the conflagration of his city, of his *world*, while carrying his father who carries a vessel containing the ashes of their ancestors (see Artwork 9).<sup>560</sup> There is movement in this carrying, even if it is a single step with ashes in one's hand and flames at one's feet.

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<sup>558</sup> Levinas, BPW, p. 87.

<sup>559</sup> I would argue that somewhere close to poetry's core is the work of metaphor, which as its etymology suggests, is kind of carrying beyond or transfer, a transport in motion that occurs when words are discovered to have shared properties circulating between them, one word carrying the other to a place of greater clarity and insight. The word metaphor is a descendent of the ancient Greek word *μεταφορά* (metaphora), which is comprised of *meta* (beyond, after, changed) and *phora* (carrying). “metaphor, n.” OED online. [www-oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/117328](http://www-oed-com.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/view/Entry/117328).

<sup>560</sup> Of this scene of Aeneas carrying Anchises as Troy burns, Virgil writes, “So come, dear father, climb up onto my shoulders! I will carry you on my back. This labor of love will never wear me down. Whatever falls to us now, we both will share one peril, one path to safety. [...] And you, my father, carry our hearth-gods now, our fathers' sacred vessels.” *Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Classics, 2010), Book II, p. 123. See also, Daniele Pinton, *Bernini: Sculptor and Architect* (Rome, Italy: ATS Italia Editrice, 2009), p. 12.

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Artwork 9

Pierre Lepautre, *Enée et Anchise*, circa 1697

Marble, height: 2.64 meters (8.6 ft), length: 1.14 meters (3.7 ft)

Musée du Louvre, Paris, France

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After reading and discussing Brown's poem, which is simultaneously an exercise in exploring and thinking critically about the nature, purpose, and value of poetry, I give participants a writing prompt with the following instructions, which we discuss in detail:

### **Part 1: Create a List**

#### **THE PAST: First & Last**

List 2 significant "Firsts" in your life

*examples:* the first time you travelled from home; the first person who harmed you; the first time you fell in love; the first time you doubted yourself or trusted yourself, etc.

List 2 significant "Lasts" in your life

*examples:* the last time you saw your mother; the last time you cried; the last time you surprised yourself; the last time you dreamed and what was the dream, etc.

#### **THE PRESENT: Here & Now**

List 2 significant things going on in your life in the here and now

*examples:* who are the people in your life right now that you love and respect; what's currently keeping you up at night; what are you feeling now as you write this poem; what do you currently need from others; what is your current mood; what do you think of yourself at this point in your life, what is your current favorite thing to do or eat, etc.

#### **THE FUTURE: Sooner or Later**

List 2 significant things you hope or expect will happen in the future

*examples:* who you might love or forgive; what you might say or do on the last day of your life or the life of a loved one; what goals you might accomplish, what places you might visit, what poems you might write, etc.

#### **THE ETERNAL: To Infinity & Beyond**

List 2 timeless sounding truths you think apply to all people in all times.

*examples:* what doesn't kill you makes you stronger; time heals all wounds; the grass is always greener on the other side; in God all things are possible; two wrongs don't make a right; the night is darkest just before dawn; everything has a purpose, etc.

Please note you can use any of my examples above or create your own examples.

## Part 2: Expand the List

Now, select 1 thing you wrote about *from each list above* to elaborate on in more detail. Try to reflect on *why* you chose that item to list in the first place. Why is it meaningful to you? What else can you say about it?

## Part 3: Shape the List

Now, weave all the individual pieces together into a poem so that it moves between past, present, future, and timelessness. You may want to shuffle the items around to see what flows best and to see what sounds best. Think of it like a collage—there are no rules of what goes where.

What I am calling collage in the instructions is the writing technique of parataxis, which proves useful in this context.<sup>561</sup> A paratactic poem is one that frees the writer from needing to construct a narrative that flows from start to finish and ends in some kind of epiphany or resting place. It also helps to lessen the anxiety that overwhelms some clients before the act of writing itself when their thoughts scatter and they cannot think of a coherent theme or unified approach to their poem. It accomplishes these things because its focus is on conjunction instead of connection, of placing words and sentences side by side that do not have an obvious link to one another or that make you work hard to imagine one. One of the results of the paratactic approach is that it can defamiliarize language in its everyday usage which in turn can interrupt harmful patterns of thought and the routinized conformity of our everyday exchanges with other people.<sup>562</sup> In this way, the client writes freely toward surprise and the possibility of relating to themselves and to others in new and unexpected ways.

In a similar vein, parataxis causes words and sentences to interact with each other in novel ways. The paratactic poem might be likened to “plac[ing] words like stones in a display case, each stone having its own properties to be closely examined and an uncanny ability to change its appearance when placed among stones of a different character.”<sup>563</sup> This paratactic

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<sup>561</sup> *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, op. cit., pp. 350-351.

<sup>562</sup> Bruns, op. cit. p. 23.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

induced mutability provides the client an opportunity to explore and respond to the faces of words, which demands the poet and reader both hold on to “a range of senses [where] each appearance of the word requires that we read it differently, hear a different idiom, [and] keep different possibilities of meaning simultaneously in place.”<sup>564</sup>

In this writing prompt, the freedom and obligations of parataxis are coupled with the directive to move one’s mind back and forth through time. Each client writes from memory and imagination to zero their focus on significant moments from their life in the past and present and to stretch their mind into future possibilities and plans. One particular client of mine, who gave permission to quote from their poem and who will remain anonymous, struggles with shame, guilt, suicidal ideation, and feeling stuck in time and tethered to their traumatic past. The poem they wrote in response to the writing prompt and developed over many weeks is a powerful example of parataxis and moving through time that provided them a safe place to create, to explore, and to share their experiences.

The client’s poem, “It has been said,” begins with two separate fragments of memory that can be interpreted as significant firsts and lasts. Though it remains ambiguous without any context or sequence of before or after the event, the first fragment of memory can be interpreted as the first time the client felt real pain as a child. It focuses on a single object, namely, a rope on the verge of fraying. They write: “Then afraid that the end of the nylon rope / would unravel and fray, I put a lit match to the tip. / Watched it flare up and bubble before swelling black.”<sup>565</sup> What comes next is an unwelcome surprise to the child, a painful incongruity in their world of

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<sup>564</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>565</sup> Anonymous, “It has been said” (unpublished), quoted with permission by the author. This first draft of this poem was written in the 2020 Untold Stories workshop in response to the prompt “Time Travel Collage: Getting Unstuck.”

play: “the black drip hit the inside of my calf...wisps of burned flesh seared my nostrils / and the pain...cauterized my brain like a man with a branding iron.”<sup>566</sup>

The next fragment of memory comes at an unspecified time in the past and can be interpreted as the last time the client trusted an unnamed adult in their life. As if coming into focus out of nowhere, the client writes, “I did not feel the heat as he burned away the unwanted skin / The wart.”<sup>567</sup> Moving forward to the present, the fragment ends with a description of the scar created that day that still hurts. They write, “Now the lump of scar tissue, the white lump, whiter than / the red of the middle knuckle when bent, / grates the lining of my gut [...]”<sup>568</sup> The details of their physical condition in the first half of the fragment (the wart and its removal) transforms into a compelling analogy that indirectly compares their current mental state to a different physical condition, namely, the painful wounding of the stomach. Like an upset stomach or one riddled with ulcers or cancer, the feeling of being helpless to stop the searing physical pain inside the body provides a vivid parallel to the emotional pain of the pathological mourner.

The next fragment moves into the future with the client imagining the moment of their death. When death arrives and “taps my shoulder with the tip of its sickle,” the client wants “to know then, be conscious, then,” and “to be able to greet the eternal visitor with my scarred memories.”<sup>569</sup> This image, oriented to the future, can be interpreted as a hopeful vision despite the dark image of the tactile experience of the metal blade grazing the shoulder blade. Even with the grim personification of death, this fragment implies that the poet will live into the future *with* their scars and greet death with a sense of agency and integrity. The poet imagines that on the day of their death their scars will be “burned to ash with my body [...]” There is a

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<sup>566</sup> Ibid.

<sup>567</sup> Ibid.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

fortitude in this confrontation with death, both in its literal and figurative registers. In one way, the poet is offering up their own wounded body as a burnt sacrifice, which is always something *for* the other (God or otherwise)—for their forgiveness, for their acceptance, for the safeguarding of their future. Death, as a metaphorical death in life, can be read in the poem as dying to old ways and bad habits of thinking, feeling, and speaking. The lit pyre in the poem is a kind of purposeful destruction within the heart of the created poem. It is a kind of “violence from within that protects us from a violence without.”<sup>570</sup>

This image of the future permeating the present while reckoning with the past is time’s own resurrection. This kind of internal movement made manifest on the page and the attention and care brought to the poem in its creation and reception from others in the writing group are practices useful for the work of mourning. The poem can record and enact the process of catharsis by purging the poison from the wound (or at least stopping its spread) and helping the wound to become a scar. This might be described as catharsis without the consolation of a conclusion. As Kearney states:

“[W]ounds are essentially, as Freud says, *timeless*. [...] They are inexperienced experiences and that’s why they’re traumas. That’s why they express themselves as absences, as a lack of words and memory, which is acted out compulsively either in repetitive actions or dreams. [...] My hypothesis is that storytelling, oral or written, has the power which can deform and disfigure, but also can turn wounds into scars. That means leaving traces in words and works that can then be worked on.”<sup>571</sup>

Keeping in mind Gass’s conception of story and how this genre is essentially a species of prose poetry where the distinct boundaries between genres are blurred, Kearney’s hypothesis is applicable to poetry where the attention paid to language is perhaps at its most concentrated,

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<sup>570</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1951), p. 31.

<sup>571</sup> Richard Kearney, Personal Interview, see Addendum 2.

curious, and creative.<sup>572</sup> These traces found in poems can be worked on in a highly effective way in the safety and community of the writing workshop.

At the end of “It has been said,” the client returns to the present to complicate an eternal-sounding truth: “just now / and now / I recall, / ‘A home is given at birth.’”<sup>573</sup> In the final lines of the poem, which is the only couplet in the poem, the vulnerable poet asks an honest and urgent question: “But where can I reside / if where I am alive is already dead?”<sup>574</sup> This question, perhaps unique to sufferers of trauma and particularly relevant to pathological mourners, finds an empathic audience in the workshop where new cathexes are forming in the intensity of the sharing and discussion of poems. The way I lead these workshops consists of having the author read their poem to the group and then, without pause or applause, having another person read the same poem again, back-to-back. Then, with the author remaining a silent listener, the group discusses what they notice and find effective in the poem *qua* poem and what resonates with them on a personal level. After the discussion, the author is invited to give the last word which might involve providing additional context, providing their interpretation of polysemous words and textual ambiguities, or answering questions from the group.

Everyone takes turns reading other people’s poems aloud and hearing their own words spoken back to them by another voice with a different tone, cadence, and texture. If at the heart of pathological mourning is a recalcitrant narcissism where one part of the self ventriloquizes the external love-object, this practice of double reading helps to put a ripple in the spring of Narcissus, however brief, where one’s own reflection is returned through the living other. The dialogue after the double reading does not primarily function as critique *per se*, but as a practice

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<sup>572</sup> My claim that poetry is well suited for the task of writing and witnessing to scars shifts away from Kearney’s broader conception of *narrative* catharsis. But by showing how a Gass-like conception of story is poem-like, there is a way of preserving the power of narrative even as it merges with poetry’s sphere and unique capabilities.

<sup>573</sup> Anonymous, op. cit.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid.

of paying attention to each other's language to co-create the meaning of the poem and to carefully hold a space open of empathy and encouragement for the author to see and hear the traces of their scars made manifest in the words of their poem. This provides the client an opportunity to do the work of mourning and re-cathecting through the practice of poetry. As Bruns states:

[P]oetry is...receptive...[and] it would be useful to gloss this concept with Stanley Cavell's Levinas-like argument...that our relation to the world, and to others in it, is not one of knowing—knowing as objectification or conceptual determination—but one of acknowledgement and acceptance, being open and responsive to people and to things rather than trying to get a grip on them. Responsiveness to others and to things *in their irreducible singularity* calls for an intimacy [...].<sup>575</sup>

The elision of Agnete's story from *Fear and Trembling* and the elision of Abraham's inner dialogue and inner language as he departs down the mountain, causes the reader of each text to experience an *aporia* blocking the possibility of intimacy and empathy with the characters. Seeing these characters through the lens of pathological mourning allows us to see their wounds struggle and fail to become scars. The seriousness of this pathological experience where the self splits and time falters, intimates its own most vital needs. The flash of insight and play of language in poetry provides an opportune moment to reorient the pathological mourner in a different direction where a different language is spoken for the first time. In the exchange of poems, there is the possibility of sublimation and catharsis that can ensue from the intimate encounter between writer and reader, of paying attention to the shared language of self and other, of taking the time to listen, and allowing oneself to wonder where this might lead in the future, of who one might still become. This kind of exercise does not guarantee closure or a happy ending now or ever. Scars remain scars and the vulnerability to receive new wounds, self-inflicted or otherwise, never ceases. Thus, the work of mourning and the need for poetry

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<sup>575</sup> Bruns, op. cit., p. 43.

never reach a final destination.<sup>576</sup> This kind of catharsis without closure attempts to purge the poison from the wound by letting it breathe, again and again, and turning that breath into a poem, which is at its most basic breathe made manifest on the page and made memorable.

The concluding question at the end of “It has been said” asks about the possibility of having a home in the wake of life-altering sexual trauma and familial betrayal. At the end of the film, *The Wizard of Oz*, the protagonist repeats the phrase “there’s no place like home,” which despite its simplicity can be interpreted in more than one way.<sup>577</sup> The common interpretation of the famous line might go something like this: a particular home exists for a particular person which provides them a place of comfort, security, family, and belonging in an otherwise unforgiving and dangerous world. But the statement can also be read as *there is no home*, that is, there is no place in the world that exists which can embody our ideal of home. There is nothing like a home for us in this life. Conlon, in his examination of the function of art through an interpretation of *The Wizard of Oz*, states:

The source of anguish is our insistence that there be a home. Art works to heal this insistence; Oz works this way for Dorothy. There is a peace, a deep, adult peace, in Garland’s performance of the last line, in her recognition that not just our integrity, but our happiness lies in seeing that there is not a place like home for us and that is alright. We can love and live without one.<sup>578</sup>

Poetry is not a surrogate home for the pathological mourner. If anything, it is the stuff of mutability and possibility itself, a series of floating bridges ever turning and sometimes briefly cathecting in an intense agreement of feeling with another person facilitated by the many faces

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<sup>576</sup> Kearney writes, “Trauma narratives are, by their very nature, truncated, gapped, fractured, and inconclusive. They may be great stories, but they can never offer terminal solutions; there are no total cures. Writings can only work through trauma as traces and revisit them as hauntings; they can never fully retrieve such experiences or tell the whole story.” Kearney, “Writing Trauma,” op. cit., p. 87.

<sup>577</sup> Langley, Noel, Judy Garland, Frank Morgan, Mervyn LeRoy, Florence Ryerson, Jack Haley, Ray Bolger, et al. 1939. *The Wizard of Oz*, (Hollywood, Calif.), Metro Goldwyn Mayer.

<sup>578</sup> Jim Conlon, “Kansas, Oz, and the Function of Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 24, Number 3, Fall 1990, p. 106.

of the word. This constant movement makes all meaning tentative and fragile and demands both an agency of adaptation and a receptivity to relationships. The pathological work of maintaining the hyper-cathexis to the lost-object is potentially sublimated by the work required of poetry. As Bruns puts it, the poem is “structured like a calling.”<sup>579</sup> In other words, it is a summoning to listen and to be heard. It is the summoning of Abraham to come down from the mountain, of Agnete to emerge from the sea.

Abraham’s outward silence conceals his pathological inner dialogue. Perhaps his greatest secret is his guilt, which exists like a perpetually clenched fist in his mind. But the fist is part of a phantom limb, a remnant of the love-object irretrievably lost. In mirror therapy, an amputee who feels unbearable pain in their phantom limb is asked to concentrate and imagine their missing limb as moving.<sup>580</sup> For example, a patient who experiences their phantom hand as painfully clenching and cramping is asked to visualize their phantom fist unclenching and to imagine what this would feel like. At the same time, a mirror is positioned between the patient’s two arms facing the real hand. The patient must keep their head on the side of the mirror that reflects the real hand, to keep their eyes trained on the mirror, and not to look at their amputated limb. The mirror’s reflection creates the illusion of the patient having two whole hands. The patient creates a fist with their real hand while watching their “other” hand in the mirror. While maintaining their visualizations of the amputated hand unclenching, the patient is asked to unclench their real hand. The sight of their reflected hand opening and relaxing in the mirror

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<sup>579</sup> Bruns, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>580</sup> J. Foell and M. Diers, et. al., “Mirror Therapy for Phantom Limb Pain: Brain Changes and the Role of Body Representation,” *European Journal of Pain*, vol. 18, no. 5, May 2014, pp. 729-739. See also, Brenda Chan, Kenneth Heilman, et. al., “Mirror Therapy for Phantom Limb Pain,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 2007-11-22, vol. 357, no. 21, pp. 2206-2207.

causes the patient to feel the phantom hand loosening its fist as well, which causes genuine relief in the patient.

The poem in its way is like a mirror placed between the melancholic's ego and their phantom lost-object. The sadness, guilt, and pain associated with and articulated by the lost-object are reflected back to the self through the indirection and artifice of the poem. Poetry, written and shared, provides a means of seeing oneself in a new light and understanding oneself through the detour of poetic language. It also provides a unique opportunity for the pathological mourner to experience a version of themselves filtered and altered through the lives of others who listen, read, respond, and require your full attention in the here and now. In this way, the poem is escape and the opposite of escape. In this way, the poem is the power that lets the clenched fist open, however briefly, which in turn creates the possibility of its being held again, of its being touched.

### 5.3 Poetic Figures, Philosophical Fragments

As Shelly Rambo observes, despite the sparsity of details in the four Gospels regarding what occurred on the Saturday between Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, there is a clue to be found in the Apostle's Creed.<sup>581</sup> Line nine of the Creed is the location of the clue. It reads:

I believe in God,  
the Father almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth,  
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

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<sup>581</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 45.

born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died and was buried;  
*he descended into hell*<sup>582</sup>;  
on the third day he rose again from the dead.<sup>583</sup>

There, on the Middle Saturday between being crucified and rising from the dead, it states that Christ descended into hell. As I did with the Akedah, I will bracket the religious and theological content of this text in order to explore the metaphoricity within the story in its relation to pathological mourning.

If we approach the story of Christ's descent into hell via a different story and image, literally combining the two into one, latent meanings emerge for both in relation to the other. The second text I have in mind is Dante's *Inferno* and the image is Satan's self-imprisonment in the bowels of hell.<sup>584</sup> We encountered this image before in Chapter 3, describing it as a compelling metaphor for post-traumatic subjectivity in the grip of melancholia. The focus here is once again on the nature of Satan's imprisonment—that the winged creature freezes himself in a block of ice made from his own tears. The image of a person frozen up to their heart in ice is suggestive of the way the pathological mourner experiences the winter of their unrelenting guilt and arrested time. The tears that freeze and slowly cover the melancholic's body are suggestive of an annihilatory sadness. Eyes crying, ice rising, sitting alone in the dark: *he dies slowly so no one notices*.<sup>585</sup>

I now imagine the figure of Christ descending into hell where he encounters this immobile person. Like the depiction of Christ in Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor parable, he does not say anything to the mourner. He simply sits next to them in the dark breathing his

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<sup>582</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>583</sup> "Apostle's Creed," *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). Italics mine.

<sup>584</sup> Dante, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>585</sup> Cf. Stolorow, op. cit., p. 25.

rhythmical breaths, in and out. After a time, the melancholic's breathing begins to slow down and synch with Christ's breathing. At first, their breaths shine like crystals in the cold and show what is possible. Then their tireless togetherness of breathing begins to melt the ice ever so slightly. In this analogy, Christ represents the poem, which is breath made manifest on the page and in the recitation. If, according to Celan, "language is something person-like and tangible,"<sup>586</sup> then the poem is its breath. Going further, this little allegory intersects and re-channels a Celanian conception of poetry. In his "Meridian" speech, Celan writes, "Poetry: that can mean an *Atemwende*, a breathturn. Who knows, perhaps poetry travels this route...*for the sake of such a breathturn?*"<sup>587</sup> This turning of breath in its circle of in and out is, in my interpretation, both respiration and inspiration for the pathological mourner trapped in ice. It is almost as if Celan is describing this particular person held captive in their cold dark hell when he writes:

Hollow-  
whirled  
free  
the path through the men-  
shaped snow, to  
the hospitable  
glacier-parlors and -tables

Deep  
in the timecrevasse,  
in the honeycomb-ice,  
waits a breathcrystal,  
your unalterable

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<sup>586</sup> Paul Celan, *The Meridian: final version—drafts—materials*, trans. Pierre Joris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7. Italics Mine.

testimony.<sup>588</sup>

“Hollow-whirled” is an apt description of the melancholic’s circular insanity, of their poor and empty ego revolving around the illusory lost-object. If you interpret *free* as a verb instead of a noun, then it could be said that it is the poem that attempts to “free the path” of ice, to dig toward and “through the man-shaped snow” to the person trapped within it. There is a dark irony in describing the “glacier-parlors and -table” in the melancholic’s mind as hospitable. It is in fact the *ego* that plays host turned hostage to the glaciers forming inside it that serve as barriers to the outside. “Timecrevasse” is a powerful neologism to describe the melancholic’s experience of arrested time—the winterscape of annihilatory sadness that freezes time’s flow. At the very core of the timecrevasse is the honeycomb-ice created from tears that crust and crush the melancholy self. But even in that darkness “waits a breathcrystal.” This is the very possibility of the poem in its potential to be written and shared, read and received. In the poem’s instantiation it is breath before anything else. Every face of every word emits its breath, its history, its possibility. One of the tasks of poetry, of breathing, is its attestation to life in its frailty, tragedy, beauty, and brevity. That death is unalterable seems certain; that poetry contains its own unalterable power seems possible. The witness that emerges from the creation of the poem is a counterforce to the pathological conscience that seeks death.

*Live or die but don’t poison everything.*<sup>589</sup> These seven words are significant even as they are ambiguous. In the context of Sexton’s poem of a person struggling with depression and suicidal ideation, there is a choice, an audible promise, and perhaps a reminder to themselves to stay alive and “to love more.”<sup>590</sup> The final lines of the poem state: “The poison didn’t take. / So I won’t hang around in my hospital shift, / repeating the Black Mass and all of it. / I say

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<sup>588</sup> Paul Celan, *Breathturn*, trans. Pierre Joris (København and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2006), p. 101.

<sup>589</sup> Sexton, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

*Live, Live* because of the sun, the dream, and the excitable gift.”<sup>591</sup> These are Sexton’s words of witness and affirmation even if they proved to be a promise that could not be kept. And yet the directive to “live or die without poisoning everything” in the context of pathological mourning butts up against a false dilemma and an oversimplification. The words of this imperative speak with many faces and invite the reader to question and to search for meanings. What if the prospect of one’s own death is intertwined and identified with another’s death? What if the love for the lost other was a suffering love, a life altering love? And what if one felt responsible for the other’s death? Is there no taxonomy of poison, no varieties of sadness? For some, death is closer than one’s shadow, closer than one’s skin, which feels like every single cell in one’s brain is nauseated like a stomach. These lines from Wilde describe a painful discovery and another way to conceive the work of poetry:

Well, if my heart must break,  
Dear love, for your sake,  
It will break in music, I know,  
Poets' hearts break so.

But strange that I was not told  
That the brain can hold  
In a tiny ivory cell  
God's heaven and hell.<sup>592</sup>

The poet’s music takes on many forms and styles. Some songs scream in pain or in joy, some songs are small doses of poison to ward off greater poisons, and some songs are beautiful because they are true and true because they are beautiful. I imagine Abraham staring into the eyes of the ram on Mount Moriah, deciding what he will do next. The two horns near his face symbolize death and guilt. He can try to kill the ram, again and again, sacrifice after sacrifice.

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<sup>591</sup> Ibid.

<sup>592</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Complete Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 99.

Or, perhaps, he will choose differently. If to “burn an image” is a metaphor for the work of poetry, then this one short stanza by Celan might be a song in praise of Abraham, in praise of poetry:

Into the silicified forehead of a ram  
I burn this image, between  
the horns, therein,  
in the singing of the coils, the  
Marrow of the curdled  
heartseas swell.<sup>593</sup>

#### 5.4 Coda

In the fantasy where a private language seems possible, the story unfolds where teller and hearer are the same person. This story, which might be likened to a kind of autofiction<sup>594</sup> of private suffering, functions to reverse the reversal of fortune of the protagonist, and to intensify it. Its setting is a double fantasy colliding with an unbearable reality. The peregrine melancholic seeks the meaning of death in their own fatal mistakes and enacts a reckoning. Then, as the bare-bone tree produces “handkerchiefs of leaves” like a skilled illusionist, the mourner conjures a magical image for a new story where the dead one “opens the wooden doors of [her] coffin and comes out smiling and bowing all over again.”<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>593</sup> Celan, *Breathturn*, op. cit., p. 245.

<sup>594</sup> See Siddharth Srikanth, “Fictionality and Autofiction,” *Style*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2019), p. 351. He states, “the “fiction” of autofiction is necessarily a part of its pact with its audience; it is not that we are asked to read a narrative as simultaneously being fictional and nonfictional...but that we are asked to put off the question with the promise the narrative will use both fictionality and nonfictionality to reach some complex truths about the author and his or her world.”

<sup>595</sup> Linda Pastan, “November,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 57, no. 1, Winter 1981, <https://www.vqronline.org/november>.

To explore this affliction of nested stories and splitting selves fanning out from loss and guilt, it proved fruitful to retrieve other elided and eliding stories with meaningful family resemblances—Agnete buried in Silentio’s reverie, the Akedah beginning *in medias res*. Their shared trajectories with the mourner’s journey into madness were not treated as compartmentalized areas for reflection or as arbitrarily chosen fictions, but as mutually beneficial and illuminating apologues of pathological mourning. Seeing Abraham in a new light, seeing Agnete for the first time, and chasing dim scintillas down the double helix of mania and melancholia to see them more clearly from the inside—these effects ensued through theological, philosophical, psychoanalytical, and literary means precisely where they converge around the conceptual and experiential boundaries of pathological mourning.

Kierkegaard’s philosophically rich treatment of the biblical Akedah (which is marked by its own fictionalized method of exploration), his legacy of psychological insight, and his own personal struggles with melancholy made him a salient touchstone for this study. And yet it was the examination of a blind spot within his most well-known text that served as a catalyst for the encounter of Abraham and Agnete, our troubled and trembling guides through hell. Levinas, who set himself against Kierkegaard in important ways, provided the central text to examine the central trait of pathological mourning—world-shattering guilt. These often-opposed thinkers were interpreted as expressing two different sides of the *same* condition. Only taken together did the full picture of pathological mourning emerge.

A pathologist is not only a skilled diagnostician, but they also keep a trained eye towards the treatment of disease even when a cure seems far off in the future. For the diseased mourner, the art of poetry proved well suited to address some of the debilitating effects of pathological mourning—arrested time, narcissism, flight from reality, the attenuated language of guilt, and the self bent towards destruction. Poetry requires passion, which in this context means the

willingness to suffer for who and what you love. Each writer and reader of poetry must co-create the meaning of the poem together through empathy (*suffering-with*) and imagination, which requires caring enough to do the demanding work of paying attention to language and to one another in ways not often practiced in everyday life. It is perhaps worth noting that the word “cure” is a descendent of the word *cura*, the Latin word for care.<sup>596</sup> And perhaps in just this small way, the caring required in poetic creation and connection acts like a kind of momentary curative that slows the poison in the mourner’s wound from spreading.

Ultimately, the significance of this project arose in small increments like a series of interconnected rings with some rings existing in obvious proximity and others more remotely. By deepening the discourse around diseased mourning, this thesis provided an important supplement to Freud’s exploratory outline of pathological mourning found in “Mourning and Melancholia” by fleshing out the role of guilt and introducing the role time plays in the process. It also put Freudian concepts in dialogue with Kierkegaard and Levinas in ways not found in the secondary literature and demonstrated a new complementarity between Levinasian and Kierkegaardian motifs. It told a story of the lived experience of pathological mourning through significant biblical, philosophical, and literary texts, giving them fresh meaning and purpose. It provided a new interpretation of the Akedah informed by feminist and trans approaches. It gave a badly needed new translation of Baggesen’s poem, “Agnete and the Merman,” together with the first critical interpretation of it in English. Lastly, and perhaps most urgently, it made the case for the renewed importance of poetry and how the divide between its theory and practice can be bridged to help people suffering in the here and now.

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<sup>596</sup> “cure, n.1.” OED, op. cit., <https://www-oed-com.mmu.ezproxy.switchinc.org/view/Entry/46000>.

CHAPTER SIX | NO WONDER  
AN ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT OF POEMS

## No Wonder

But if the end be harsher,  
Hold it no wonder.  
—*The Pearl Poet*

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I

## Aubade

I dream of burning houses, my hands  
around another's neck.

Philosophy is not  
for young men.

You dream of water  
*panta rhei* like a river.

Where is something solid?  
Only you and me.

I know you cannot sleep,  
but soon it will be morning.

I'll make us coffee,  
donuts with sprinkles.

See the sunrise,  
no grass out of place.

I know how much you love  
morning time.

You are a wilderness  
amidst the trash of towns

as plastic hurries undrowned  
on the river's surface.

This Midwest sun is real,  
but only burns you if you let it.

Please don't forget  
to put sunscreen on your forehead.

Don't wake me—  
in my dreams

I hear your voice  
like a song sung underwater.

Ice always in the river,  
I'll swim with you on my back forever.

Philosophy is learning  
how to die.

You were always wiser  
than me.

In the myth of Tantalus,  
the murdered child

rises from the dead,  
but can what's done be undone?

I'm not so sure.  
Philosophy cannot tell.

This dream of you  
is all that's left.

## Disbelief

Motion is a marvel for  
resting.

Faith is a pistol  
firing

blanks. Certainty is  
thoughts

off their  
meds.

Denial is always double:  
wanting

no more fear  
and knowing less.

In poems,  
words are tears

artfully  
shed.

## At the Funeral

Her words were tender marvels,  
nurse logs for scattered seeds  
on bare-stripped ground.

Her bodhisattva fingers  
led me from the sepulcher:  
ablution for the drowned.

## Forever Home

The bough not smooth, the leaves not green,  
She said she was trapped in an old woman's body.  
In autumn, the soft bells of her voice would freeze

Midair and not reach the ground. Her tired thoughts  
Were gathered caches of absences, already white  
Beneath her earth-brown hair. In the soft of dawn

In the black house she would drink her coffee  
Sitting on floors in rooms with no furniture.  
She never could nest, and she could not sleep.

She took medication the size of bird seed and ate  
Less and less. In midafternoon, slight spheres  
Of light would slip through two stained-glass plates

Of horses grazing under blue sky and frozen time.  
The house sat on stilts with no back steps. The river  
Was inescapable when it rose and leapt and climbed.

The last tenant broke the tiny white bones of his infant  
Daughter and was arrested, she would learn. She fell silent  
For weeks and smoked from open windows. She listened

To the river sing its seething, and discovered the thrall  
Of the Sirens' suffering. How they, like her, searched  
In vain for the child lost to darkness, a girl so very small,

Not yet born but already loved. With curls of soft hair  
And halcyon eyes unbothered by the need to remember  
Or cover her face when she cries.— In late November

With the garden sparkling of ice, she would quietly enter  
The river, her ears and mouth unstopped. Out there  
On a meadow at the bottom of the sea where gentle

Whales floated overhead like clouds, she found the white  
Cradle and let the child drink the life from her heart.  
She kissed each eye shut and smiled. Dragonflies,

Whose heads are all eyes, circled the silver surface,  
While the moon's fever-swollen face glowed red  
Beneath the black cerecloth of night and could not rest.

## Voice(s)

Lately I've been composing poems in my head as I drive  
On my way home from teaching philosophy at Mount Mary,  
A night class that keeps me out late, taking Center east  
Toward Humboldt, toward the river and lake opaque  
As the separateness of persons—but in *John Koethe's* voice.  
That is to say, the *sound* of his distinctive voice inside my head,  
As if it were possible for an ice cube to float undiminished  
In boiling water or for a second self to nest in the first, similar  
But smarter, deeper but just as dour, from San Diego  
Instead of Corpus Christi, but both ending up in Milwaukee,  
His voice meditative and clear, but my own voice  
The product of pathological mourning and the realization  
That when I cannot find the words it is I who have failed language  
And not the other way around.

I am curious to know if there's a name for this phenomenon,  
When you've been listening to another's voice repeatedly  
Till it begins its gentle intrusion inside your mind, like the usurpation  
Of one twin by another at their mother's breast, at once a sign  
Of original sin in Saint Augustine and a disappointing theory  
About the impossibility of innocence by a guilty man,  
But in my metaphor a sign of literary auditory hallucination,  
The lesser aggressive brother of the psychogenic fugue  
Wherein the fugue state full-grown ghosts with teeth  
Appear beside you from within to accuse you of wasting life,  
Theirs and yours. *I would know*, I think to myself in Koethe's voice.

*But do your thing, and I shall know you*, wrote Emerson in 1841  
In the first draft of "Self-Reliance," which he meant as an invitation  
To work, maybe even write poems, but with one major condition:  
If you write, then it better be *your* work in *your* voice or else  
You are cutting your own throat with another's hand.  
I'm now imagining desolate Abraham on Mount Moriah  
With knife raised in obedience to another voice only he can hear,  
While keeping Sarah and their son in the dark. Death enters

Life through the death of others who cannot be saved  
But only loved. Lately I sit up in bed listening to Koethe's voice,  
Two tabs open on my laptop: a video of him giving a reading  
At the University of Chicago and a poem of his called "Chester"  
That both live online—all so I can read along as he reads,  
His poetic voice wrested from the wrong end of life,  
Warming every word from within, loosening the poem's  
Precise sutures of stylized indifference.

Of all the interpretations of the *Akedah*, I prefer to read the story  
Of Abraham and Isaac as if it were an auditory hallucination,  
A parable of how traumatic loss and unrelenting guilt  
Create two distinct and warring voices inside a person's head:  
The voice of who you thought you were and the voice of who  
You have become and must kill—*because we can't go on like this*.  
Perhaps Koethe's voice, like God's, is a metaphor for talking  
To myself about the fears I cannot face, which tells me that  
Maybe I make too much of things or that I'm yet another sucker  
For regret. Maybe so, but it is peculiar the way melancholy  
Undermines memory while binding a person to the past,  
Even as we stay up later than usual watching late April snow  
Through the glass, through the lamplight in the middle distance,  
Safe in the middle knowledge things have, not willing to admit  
We're more like the ram than Abraham or Isaac, appearing  
Then disappearing in a single verse while the story  
Continues for someone else who saves the severed horns  
As a souvenir of the life they took for granted.

# II

## Swimming

entire surface cluttered with light  
flesh undulates against its will  
I press my pair of hands together  
to still its trembling

from above the bay's an outline  
of a rubbed-out face  
sandy beach is bruised  
like the forehead of a fallen child  
seagrass a slick bracelet of hair  
no one will ever brush

\*

when is water not water  
when it's a grave  
what's the condition called  
when you want to throw yourself  
    ...a baby shower  
    ...a birthday party  
    ...off a tall building  
*l'appel du vide*, apparently  
one senses the mind will never catch up  
with the body  
do babies  
    ...dream  
    ...go to heaven  
    ...instinctively hold their breath under water  
becoming animal isn't easy  
as it used to be

\*

a necessary condition of friendship  
is shared activity  
the act of keeping each other afloat

for example

\*

we received mostly picture frames  
we didn't ask for  
as wedding gifts

years later you took the toy-like  
ferris wheeled-one  
filled each carriage with a child's smiling face  
placed it in your blue backpack  
the night you drowned yourself

\*

somewhere far above  
this reeking sea  
teen wolf is on tv  
telling me to *be my own anchor*

sometime in the future that you're not in  
I'll fabricate the pictures from today  
blue skies blue water blue eyes

*blue root as well as blossom*

\*

in the sea when something's sunk  
it becomes a home for something else

## Eighteen Voltas

sometimes I experience sources arising from which  
the striving ensues a fit discomfiture eccentric hectic  
am I here yet

*non liquet*

goddamn is this our best *homo homini*  
*lupus est*

\*

black magic knows nothing of these diseases  
no sore throat develops by chance there is an evil eye  
in each and every case  
there is nobody here but me  
who can exist all alone  
is either a monster  
or a god

\*

you were right when you said even this  
is lacking to a god  
*to undo the things that have once been done*  
tell me please about the dream where I pull your body  
from the river  
to dress you in warm clothes again

\*

the one in ecstasy & the one drowning both raise their weightless arms  
when I scream or sing your name  
the knife in my mind steadies &  
lowers for the cut  
whether to heal  
or harm  
depends on the season

\*

*Melancholia* the star-shaped birthmark

or acquired like a scar

I am responsible for god and our story

you did not bear arms

or know them

for I showed you my sword you took it by the sharpened edge  
and cut yourself

Every icy crag tinkled like iron the base-  
ment flooded

## Preliminary Notes on the Tactile Portrait of Two People

compare her heart to a well  
& him to brackish water  
sink down  
the well  
like a stone  
touch the sides  
of this wet cell  
let the rot  
make contact

\*

he was never hard as rock she  
was never smooth as glass  
he was calloused fingers  
and cold hands she  
was smoke  
swelling from a cigarette

\*

for all their lies  
they were still very loveable

like braille on a broken heart he tried  
to decipher the signs  
of her disappointment

\*

the title  
*the slender rod of my sense*  
*pocks the angel as a grain in the snow*  
*(autolaocoön)*

\*

the materials

river water in a jar

hair from a brush

polaroid of her playing

with baby on the floor

\*

the epigraph

*after all there are some who get paid*

*for touching*

\*

in certain circumstances two people

in different times or places

can touch each other

though they don't leave each other intact

## Epistles

Understand I need these fragments. To tell it once is not enough.

—*Emily Skaja*

what is fungible

the quiet word fatigued by noise

being forgotten

dear disappeared bodies that we die

& do not know the meaning

in truth

I am meant to speak more plainly

*Katie, I cannot find a way*

*to talk about this*

\*

dear mouths

full of silence I am free to believe

the drowned can speak can breathe can babble

a friend wrote to me

things can be more than one thing

& how can you not stutter

under this water

*Katie, I'm afraid to be one thing*

\*

I saved her handwritten letters & the leaves

pressed in books she wrote notes

in all caps on lined paper calling my attention

to white pines

blue-eyed grass

wilding hawks

in a fathom of silence

she keeps asking to be believed

*Katie, I wake up saying I'm sorry*

\*

words fording the thin crossing

where yes and no

are swept away

where I don't recognize this body in winter

when the river freezes & the poem dies back

to its roots

\*

what's the real difference

between poet and poem

one gathers & holds the other together

but I'm not sure which

does

which

*dear Katie,*

*your book made me wonder*

## Smoke & Mirrors

A fter suicide  
when skin retracts  
from dehydration  
hair and nails appear  
to keep growing

\*

she was an exquisite  
onychophagist  
her fingers  
non-linear  
she made cigarettes  
disappear

\*

*what I cannot know*  
*I must not forget*  
is my first  
tattoo

\*

the shape of my mouth  
with laughter  
teeth do not sit  
directly in bone

my crown shines  
with a gem-shaped solipsism  
they call it  
“smiling depression”

\*

can no one see this vermillion?

I ask looking at my hands

\*

they brushed her hair  
for the viewing

it was soft and straight and clean

## My Empty Discard Pile

Know when to fold ‘em...

—Kenny Rogers

I cheat.

I mustn’t.

I frot\* my

uncertainty.

The shiner’s†

showing.

Brittle.

Nicht.\*\*

Poor ghost’s

roust‡ is

alarming.

Helzbelz\*\*\*

everly ring

Abysmal &

Acousmatic.<sup>n</sup>

\*frot – *to rub or polish;*

*to chafe; to stroke or*

*caress a wounded animal*

†shiner – *a mirror, esp. used*

*by cheaters at cards;*

*black eye*

\*\*nicht – *the dark*

*that prevails; Not*

‡roust – *a voice; a shout*

*a roar*

\*\*\*helzbelz – *expression*

*conveying anger*

<sup>n</sup>acousmatic – *to hear*

*without seeing the source*

*of the sound*

# III

## “Just Say Sad”

A poem may be devoted to giving a clear meaning to one word.

—*George Oppen*

*Melancholia* as elated bereavement,  
it is to take enjoyment in sadness:  
a trist delight.

Not quite.

Its genus is traumatic loss,  
which it shares with mourning.  
Its specific difference is

*unrelenting* guilt.

\*

Albrecht Dürer, “Melencolia I” (1514)  
Lucas Cranach, “Die Melancholie” (1532)

\*

Imagine Prometheus, for example, goaded by the pains  
of chains and tearing beaks,  
pressing himself deeper and deeper  
into the rock  
until he becomes nothing at all  
to anyone.

\*

The melancholic mind knows only itself,  
which is loneliness.

Being in it alone means  
there is nobody there

to stop you.

\*

Artemisia Gentileschi, “María Magdalena como melancolía” (1622-1625)

Caius Gabriel Cibber, “Raving and Melancholy Madness” (circa 1676)

\*

Sometimes  
the brain is unwelcome.

The brain is like a cave where prisoners play  
with shadows.

The shadows are images of the dead,  
obviously.

The prison  
is the mind itself.

There is no more  
outside.

\*

Joseph-Marie Vien, “La Douce Mélancolie” (1756)

\*

*A melancholic sorrow in the heart him bit  
Alone he would all day in darkness sit*

\*

Her shadow-wave

(whose function

is to burst)

falls upon his ego, turns  
every threshold to stone

turns up unexpectedly  
till he can no longer say tender things tenderly

\*

According to legend,  
his treachery was forgotten  
after a thousand years,  
forgotten by the gods, the eagle,  
the rock, forgotten by himself.

Eventually the gods grew weary,  
the eagle and the rock grew weary,  
even his wounds closed wearily.

In *mania*,  
all things are possible.

\*

The immobility of repose,  
the head crowned and drowned in doubt—  
*suiciding* melancholia

\*

Francesco Hayez, “Malinconia” (1840-41) and “La Meditazione” (1851)  
Edgar Degas, “La méancolie” (circa 1874)

\*

in mourning,  
it is the world that has become poor & empty—

in melancholia,  
it is the ego itself

\*

Edvard Munch, “Melankoli III” (1902)  
Käthe Kollwitz, “Frau mit totem Kind” and “Pietà” (1903)  
Egon Schiele, “Trauernde Frau” (1912)

\*

an impoverishment of the ego  
on a grand scale,  
in fact—

an *annihilatory* sadness

\*

Salvador Dalí, “Uranium and Atomica Melancholica” (1945)

\*

the melancholic keeps one eye on the drying clepsydra

\*

Jan Svoboda, “Melancholy” (1963) and “Picture That Will Not Return XXXV” (1972)

\*

the poem  
the trace of his breath  
in language  
he holds it when he thinks of her  
entering the dark water to die

\*

Anselm Kiefer, “Melancholia” (2004)

Cecily Brennan, “Melancholia” (2005)

\*

When the melancholic,  
in his heightened self-criticism,  
describes himself as

*guilty, petty, dishonest, afraid*

he has come very near  
to understanding himself

\*

that he has killed the thing he loves  
that he has *willed* it

\*

In May, snow falls softly  
with nowhere to go—  
the inevitable disappearance—  
*vicarious* melancholia

\*

Lars von Trier, *Melancholia* (2011)

Raqib Shaw, “Allegory of Melancholy” (2017-2018)

\*

The internal topography of the melancholic mind takes shape within the anti-cathexis of the outside. Like a fistula between flesh and thought, it opens and channels through his sense of time.

\*

Peter Howson, "Prophecy" (2019)

\*

dysphasia  
dysphemia  
dysphotic  
dysthymia  
dystopic

\*

Melancholy is his most faithful mistress.  
No wonder, then, that he loves her in return.

\*

remembering  
always

how she discarded her body  
and he looked for it, looked

so cold was the river  
as her folded hands were cold

\*

*melan* **black**

+

*chole* **bile**

*beckoning* melancholia

\*

the way death gauzes every feeling  
and every thought—

*prescient* melancholia

\*

that the dead cannot forgive  
is the melancholic's curse

\*

Philip Surey, "I ♥ Melancholy" (2020)

\*

/saturated with color/

satcrā (dark grey)

sat-rōt (dark red)

sattblau (dark blue)

being a partial etymology of  
sad

# IV

## Exile

Desert mountains lacerate the dusk.  
The bus hums on to Hama, orotund as song  
from human lips. It stops along the moonlit road  
to let men smoke or pray  
where winter winds from Lebanon  
scatter thoughts like ash.

Wet stone road and the gnaw of wheels.  
Heat rises up my back and bursts to sweat.  
In the black of the bus, I try to forget  
deceit, desire, and death.  
Memory whips me forward,  
a beast of burden plowing frozen ground.

## Dead Sea

Expect the end. See  
it near, be resolute  
in the seeing. Accept  
the end as sharp stones  
on soft skin.  
See if you swim.

## The Hunter

Emad, who paints the ancient water wheels  
and women who toss aside their head scarves,  
takes out his knife to cut away the seals  
of wine, of thoughts. His heart, expertly carved  
by death's decisive cut, offers up a slice  
of orange and the pipe to smoke out djinns.  
He spreads his paint and points to words of vice  
and loss, a poem about nomadic old men  
that hangs upon his wall. It starts: "Alone  
the hunter stands before the vacant place,  
where ruins of past lovers provide no home  
and darkness slips across his hardened face."  
His self-portrait's for sale: skin pale as the drowned,  
and eyes shut tight like an ancient, buried town.

## The Binding

Commanded by God the father,

Abraham killed his son Isaac to prove his fidelity.

With steady hands, he slaughtered the boy

According to the rite. He exhaled.

A heavenly dew resurrected the corpse

Brought back to life before his father's eyes. Abraham,

Ever dutiful, grabbed his son and tried to kill him

Again—to kill him *twice*.

The angels, terrified, wondered aloud

If any other creature had suffered this fate. The angels,

Who bitterly wept, flooded the earth with tears.

The rising waters carried the boy to Eden.

I imagine Abraham the father

Up to his chin in water, looking toward the heavens,

Refusing to be drowned, swimming towards Eden

With the knife between his teeth

Afraid to remember and afraid to forget.

## Psalm

I think of your last letter  
and a thousand tortures—

I think of you with child  
your voice echoing through  
a stairwell as you sang, each word  
loved by the care of  
your tongue, each breath

wild and strong like the horses  
that live in the shade of the firs  
of your sinking island,  
and your voice a sanctuary  
from drowning. I think of your seven  
seeds and your seven axes  
and how you were Noah

trading favors for fuel and shofar,  
building your ark to cross an ocean of  
grief and guilt—  
asking me to share the waiting.  
I think of your grandmother's gloves  
you could not bear to part with,  
smooth over your small hands.

I think of the moment when our talk  
turned to touch, gentle running of my  
finger on your finger—  
endless night and a call to prayer  
to remind us of morning. I think of your hijab  
and the suitcase of clothes  
you were saving for Bedouins—

Azraq on fire from a single cigarette—  
I think of destruction and the end of the world,  
of men's violence

and the scar on your throat,  
of changing tables three times to avoid their glaring eyes.

I think of drinking mint tea as night fell  
softly as lace from a sable shroud.

I think of the coming judgment, the end  
of exile, and every subterfuge of imagination.

And even now I think of your body  
next to my body, how we were so beautiful  
and comfortable and warm in each other's arms.

I think of how such things are rare  
and this is not the way the world is

but it was with us.

V

## Der Traum ist das Ding

Man and absence - the twin spirit he unites with when he dreams, longs  
—*Mallarmé*

In the dream I finally solve the riddle.  
The twinning of guilt and grief stop spinning,  
Yet it is no new miracle equivalent of wholeness.

In the dream I'm the one who's dead.  
I am the thing in the dream  
Keeping her sleepless.

In the dream she is skipping stones in the river  
Where her body was found. I study each rock's  
Adumbrations as they pass above me.

Philosophy does well with medium-sized dry objects.  
How even the simplest living thing hosts a syllogism:  
All living things split. If a living thing splits,

Then it has the sudden urge to scream.  
A poem is the artful manifestation  
Of a sudden urge to scream.

In the wake of dreams, the loved one lies alone  
Beneath the stone, alone  
After death, once and for all.

In the wake of dreams, I split  
Splinterless  
From chopping block.

I scream  
Are you there?  
Are you?

## Exit Interview

Q: your file says you're originally from Texas,  
but we won't hold it against you

A: but if it were not so, it would not be worth the trouble  
to reflect on exile

Q: management wants to know if in loving the dead  
are the dead kept close enough

A: when she died a part of me died too  
that's why I take so long to respond to emails

Q: what do we need to look for  
in your replacement

A: someone who can give a perspicuous account  
of their guilt

Q: how have you come to this decision  
to leave the company

A: both decision and incision  
are types of cutting

Q: what do you fear might not ever be said  
if you don't say it

A: she didn't deserve to die alone  
with me so near

The Last Chapter of *Otherwise Than Being* Rewritten as a Poem

Your voice is not even an echo  
And I am carrying your bones from here.  
Your voice is not the voice inside the wound  
Only I can hear.

Steel wool clouds brush the horizon  
Debriding the sky  
Removing the sun  
On Yom Kippur.

It is the anniversary of your drowning.  
I am holding my breath to be with you.  
I am burning every candle in the room.

Since this war began, I do not die  
All at once. There is empty talk  
Of surrendering the hostages.

What say the victims of the triumph?  
There are vows and oaths  
Stuck in our throats. We are teaching our lungs  
To cease their revolt.

Your still face, hands in front:  
Now I see you, now I don't.

I am never done shuddering.  
I am closing my eyes—  
The afterimage in me still,  
Against my will.

I am leaving behind what is said in these words.  
I am leaving how many voices unheard.  
I am cutting holes in sheets

For ghosts to speak  
Their crushing charges.

## Narcissus

Poetry, like philosophy, begins in wonder:  
An astonishment of words.

In the myth of Narcissus, the boy's twin sister  
Dies. Later, when he catches sight

Of his image in the river, he looks lovingly  
At himself thinking it is her.

He forgets his own face. He forgets  
His own voice thinking it is her voice.

He approaches her open face, while his own  
Is thin skin stretched over a vacancy.

He takes her image inside himself  
So they both can live again.

She speaks: *my death is all your fault, Narcissus.*  
*Stop writing now. Stop everything. You owe me this.*

Philosophy, like poetry, pays attention  
To language: thinking itself to death.

Every word is a drowned lung  
That makes no sound.

He puts his face underwater  
To hear her better.

The body sobs, water seeps into his dreams,  
The future is neatly guillotined.

When the I is finally gone, so is the image  
That kept her from vanishing.

Philosophy knows not what it does.  
Poetry is yet another flawed act of love.

## Among the Living

1.

I knelt for one hour on one knee  
reading Anne Sexton  
trying to find the lines where she reveals  
the reasons why  
some of us want to die all the time.

I like you, Anne. You say that death begins  
like a dream  
with loved one's laughter  
and wild blueberries,  
where the dead refuse to be blessed,  
men kill to be touched,  
and love's an infection.

Anne, prophetess of destruction,  
I'm still among the living.  
Anne, with your dark truth  
and old dwarf heart,  
I love you.

Wrap your poisoned arms around me.  
I am lonely, too.

2.

My best friend of ten years  
called me from the psychiatric hospital.  
Her voice was very small and thin  
like the powder-white almond blossoms  
on that Van Gogh print  
we bought in Amsterdam those years ago  
when we were married.  
Such branched loveliness—

it made her very happy then.

*Pain is hard to uproot: so vast,  
a splendor of ruin.*

3.

*Practice death*, Plato says,  
because we're out of tune,  
drunk with lust and ignorance  
flying our fleshy chariots  
into the sun until we burn  
and the center of our firework  
goes CRACK  
and somebody says, "Awww—how beautiful"  
or "what a shame"

and only dark and smoke remain.

## Surrender

The poem—  
prosthesis for someone  
who's lost his mind  
hides the quiet  
of her never-coming-back:  
bruised-black, bled-white  
the lines on the page.  
His upturned heart's  
soon a ruin  
without it. Still  
there are propinquities: a close  
reading of her last email  
before she drowned herself  
hurts the same every time. Still  
the dead are dead, and the rest  
go limping on without him. Guilt,  
like water, works under and washes away  
the ground. His mind, like a clefted nub  
of stretched red skin,  
keeps reaching  
for the words...

O Reader,  
please look into my tired face.  
Can't you see  
this is me  
with my hands up?

## Ars Poetica

Not all resurrections are good resurrections.  
Think about it. I'll give you a moment.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1

Were you thinking about zombies? Me too.

I know the ghost in my poems  
is not alive. Her presence is just my presence

but I can't stop playing pretend.

Without the music in poems,  
the play of words that make a world,  
life would be a mistake.

(I have made so many mistakes already).

When I say *you* or *your* in poems,  
I am pretending to talk  
directly to her

even though she's dead.

Here are a few examples:

*the spring before your suicide, six months  
after our divorce,  
we sat drinking coffee  
at the little table in your kitchen,  
our faces a few inches apart,  
when you said in a soft but sure voice  
we were still meant to do something  
important together.*

Or—

*did you know*

*I still use your Social Security number  
for online passwords?*

Or, again—

*Am I the only person alive*

*who saw the blue ice form  
in the glacier of your eye  
when your heart was breaking?*

And so on.

In a poem, when you talk to someone  
who isn't really there  
it's called *apostrophe*.

It delights me that *apostrophe* means *turning away*

because in pretending to talk to a dead person I am  
turning away from the reality where they are gone forever.

That's why we have art  
so we don't die of the truth.

That's the second time I've alluded to Nietzsche in this poem.

To allude comes from the Latin verb *ludēre*, which means *to play*.  
To talk to dead people in poems is ludicrous. I *know*.

To believe the dead are not dead  
is a symptom of manic denial, a pathological  
state of mind characterized by delusions  
of omnipotence.

*Mania*, an old Greek word for madness,

means both *to rage*  
and *to be inspired*.

Inspire, as in  
*to breathe or blow air into*,  
like CPR—

poems give  
CPR to the dead  
so we can catch our breath  
to pause the panic  
for a moment

which only lasts till the next poem comes,  
if it lasts that long—

Inhale  
1, 2, 3, 4, 5

I am not incomplete

and the world  
is not empty

I'll talk to you tomorrow

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## Appendix A

A Failure of Empathy is the Opposite of Peace:  
Thoughts on the Nature and Purpose of Literary Art

*An Interview with Bret Anthony Johnston*<sup>597</sup>

**BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON** is author of the award-winning *Corpus Christi: Stories*, which was named a best book of the year by *The Independent* and *The Irish Times*, and the editor of *Naming the World: And Other Exercises for the Creative Writer*. His debut novel, *Remember Me Like This*, was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year, a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers selection, and the winner of the 2015 McLaughlin-Eastman-Stearns Prize. In 2017, Bret won The Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award, “the world’s richest and most prestigious prize for a single short story.”

Previously the Paul and Catherine Battenwieser Director of Creative Writing at Harvard University for eleven years, Bret is now Director of the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas-Austin.

### Interviewer

Do writers have a responsibility to society in the art that they create? Or can it be pure entertainment?

### Bret Anthony Johnston

I think you have a responsibility to the reader and to the characters if you’re doing fiction. Responsibility boils down to not passing judgment. I think it’s not the writer’s job to pass judgment, but to put a compelling and arresting enough story or narrative in front of the reader and let the reader pass judgment. I think that the responsibility you’re asking about—for me, I guess I worry it would stifle the imagination. I think the job of the imagination is to be

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<sup>597</sup> Interview conducted by Austin M. Reece.

irresponsible when you're creating art. If you saddle it with responsibility to society or anything like that, I worry that it short circuits something. Certainly, there are plenty of writers who disagree, and it almost sounded like when we were talking with Margaret Atwood earlier that she wouldn't disagree, which is certainly bolstering.

A lot of writers say they have something to say and I'm always really dubious of that. I never go into anything with something to say. I always go in with curiosity; I go in with something to ask as opposed to say. I think you have a responsibility to the reader to say, "I'm going to be here with you and reward your attention," but I don't want *my* agenda to come into the work. I feel like any time the agenda comes into the work it's compromised it. Everybody else is going to disagree with that but that's my opinion. My responsibility ends with the readers and the characters.

### **Interviewer**

Emmanuel Levinas says that philosophy should be concerned with ethics first and foremost. And it's something to think about in terms of literature as well. In this vein, literature would be judged on how well it engages with ethical issues and whether or not it brings about empathy. What are your thoughts on this possible intersection between ethics and literary art?

### **Bret Anthony Johnston**

I definitely think about empathy, but I don't think about ethics. People can get into really interesting debates and conversations with Venn diagrams on the topics of ethics and empathy, which is a completely interesting subject. But as a writer and a reader, for me, empathy trumps ethics. I first and foremost prioritize empathy to the exclusion of ethics if need be. I would say that I'm interested in what might be called *logic* and empathy. I'm interested in making sure

that a piece of work, whether it's mine or someone else's, adheres to the logic that it sets out as its ideal form. I don't want my personal ethics to intercede with the logic of the world trying to be created on the page. So, I want the logic to be cogent but that's always in service of empathy. I'm one of those people who really throws their lot in with empathy.

### **Interviewer**

In reading your recent novel, *Remember Me Like This*, which has a variety of very different characters, I felt empathy as *suffering with* each character. And yet it felt like the characters came alive in their suffering. Connecting to this, Atwood has a line in one of her poems, "I hurt, therefore I am." Do you think writing can be redemptive when it comes to *real world* loss and pain? Do you think redemption or catharsis is something that is genuinely possible through writing and reading literature?

### **Bret Anthony Johnston**

The answer is emphatically yes. I think there's a sliding scale as to whether or not it's cathartic or redemptive for the writer. I think it *must* be cathartic and redemptive for the reader. It goes back to some degree to the Greeks and to Plato with the allegory of the cave. We participate in these, what are basically, plays. Whether it's a novel or a poem or whatever, we participate in these plays as a way of experiencing the emotions. We play within the play. We empathize so that if, God forbid, we ever go through any of these experiences we A) know that we're not alone (even if the characters are imaginary) and we B) know that we can survive them. And I think that's the power of what we're dealing with. It teaches you that you can survive and there has to be catharsis in that, there has to be redemption in that. There has to be a feeling of community. And I think that is more given to longer narrative forms whether it be an epic poem,

whether it be a novel or play, than it is to shorter forms like shorter forms of poetry and short stories. Those can certainly be redemptive and cathartic in the way that we're talking about, but the experience is so acute that they can often feel more like an end as opposed to a beginning. I do feel that in an epic poem or novel it should feel like, in one way or another, a beginning, an invitation, and an assurance that we can survive.

### **Interviewer**

Do you think there's something owed to the reader in terms of providing closure when coming to the end of a long work such as *Remember Me Like This*? Do you think the logic of the work should come to its necessary conclusion? Do you think to get that level of catharsis or redemption that you need the story to come to a resting place or to open up to something hopeful?

### **Bret Anthony Johnston**

I don't think it has to be hopeful, but I do think it has to come to that resting place. The way I think about endings is absolutely, one hundred percent informed by Flannery O'Connor. I don't know how much time you've spent with her. Her idea about ending is that it has to be both surprising and inevitable. It's inevitable because it's reached the end of its logic and yet there's a surprise within it which creates this invitation. John Updike has a really brilliant metaphor for how fiction must end. He says as you're moving through the narrative it's like you're walking down a very long hallway with hundreds upon hundreds of false doors painted on the walls. You know that you've read a good-great-brilliant story or fiction, you know that you've read something powerful, when you're led to the one and only door that opens. There are all these ways that you feel like it *could* have ended, but it would have been a dead end. But when you

get to the one that opens it's both an end and a beginning. I do believe that one hundred percent. But I don't necessarily believe it has to be hopeful. I think the hope comes from that thing we were talking about before—just that you've made it through it, you've survived it. That's hope enough.

### **Interviewer**

I really agonized with the last pages of your novel and how there's so much that remains unknown in any relationship. It's interesting to read Eric Campbell's thoughts as he runs through the possibilities [surrounding Buford's death], through these labyrinths of thought, and then is brought back to the car ride with his family where they're all just in the moment being there together. There's something peaceful in that. Part of my funding [to conduct this interview] is coming from the Center for Peacemaking, and they're always looking to explore creative forms of non-violent action that results in greater understanding. It seems obvious to me to say that, in some form, a novel or poem could be a non-violent act that brings people together. Does that ring true to you—that a novel or poem is a form of non-violent action that can lead people away from other forms of violent action? Or is that stretching, is it reaching?

### **Bret Anthony Johnston**

I don't think it's stretching or reaching because of the word "could." Can it? Absolutely. For me, this is why I place such a high priority on empathy. Obviously, I can only speak for myself, but the goal is always empathy and I do think if a text invites empathy from either, let alone both, the reader and the writer, I don't see how that doesn't lead us toward peace. I think a failure of empathy is the opposite of peace. I think if you can be drawn in, even with a work that is rife with violence, to empathizing, and to think *I get it, I understand, I can relate, I have*

*curiosity toward this situation*, as opposed to judgment, then how does that not lead us away from violence? How does that not lead us toward peace? Because I think “there but for the grace of God” as opposed to saying “O, I could never do that, I pass judgment on that.” So, could it? In my opinion it’s absolutely yes. Does it always? Certainly not.

### **Interviewer**

Do ideas like transcendence or even faith resonate with you personally or inform your writing at all? With empathy and the various other things that are operative in your writing, does it open up onto something, could I say, religious or spiritual?

### **Bret Anthony Johnston**

Well, I think if you think of what is the vernacular definition of the word “church”—it’s a body of believers. I think when I’m writing, when I’m reading, I really do feel connected to humanity in a way that I don’t when I’m not writing or reading. So many people say, and this veers into that agenda thing, “I write to express myself.” I’ve never been one of those people. I do not do that. In a very kind of rudimentary way, I don’t even understand that. I write almost exclusively to escape myself. I write to connect with whatever the reader brings to the reading experience, to whatever the characters are. I’m not interested in myself - I’m interested in *escaping* myself. And so, if we think about that it really does become a body of believers—it becomes my belief in the characters, the character’s belief in the other characters, the readers’ belief in the characters. And because I feel so connected to humanity in such an unadulterated way when I’m reading or writing, that’s where I think the possibility of transcendence comes from—because there’s a connection and you dissolve into it. You’re a part of something bigger than yourself which is what faith operates on.

Again, hearing the way that you're moving in these questions, and maybe you've already done it, but if you have not you should spend as much time as you can with Flannery O'Connor. She's definitely has a Catholic bent to what she's interested in, but the way that she engages faith, the way she does and does not pass judgment on her characters, the way she invites the reader in, I think you would find a lot to excavate there. I would read her letters. Her novels are far inferior to her stories, but her novels are also where her Catholicism is perhaps more in the forefront. It's certainly in the forefront in some of her stories, but it's more so in the novels. That may be in fact why they are inferior. I think for someone with a mind like yours, and with interests like yours, it might really pay off to spend time with her. Not to mention she's probably the most violent writer you've ever read.

#### **Interviewer**

I've read her story where the family gets murdered by the side of the road.

#### **Bret Anthony Johnston**

That's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." That's a story that complicates the questions of can fiction lead to peace and how does violence factor into this. That's the very famous moment in literature where the misfit who kills the family says [about the grandmother] that she would have been a good woman had somebody held a gun to her head every moment of her life. The way that complicates questions of an agent of God, questions of virtue, questions of morality, I think you would love it.

#### **Interviewer**

I wanted to follow-up on something you said earlier about catharsis and redemption taking effect from the writer's perspective, that is, how it impacts the writer himself or herself. I'm

drawn to the idea that there are two violent poles within the experience of pathological mourning—*mania* where the person denies responsibility, feels omnipotent, and where their flight from reality can hurt the real people left in their orbit, and *melancholia* where the person experiences such horrendous guilt that they inflict terrible violence on themselves. And I'm drawn to the idea that creating literary art, especially poetry, can be an important part of the work of mourning. I wonder if through the writing and sharing of literary art that it might lead to some place, maybe not the *right* place, but a better place where a person might feel genuinely comforted. Since you live the life of a writer-teacher, I'd like to know if writing brings solace and consolation to you or if it's more of a torturous process that makes you feel worse in some way.

### **Bret Anthony Johnston**

It's overstating to say that it's torture, but I really do believe with very few exceptions, if any exceptions, that writing is *the* most difficult thing we'll *choose* to do. I think that we will do things that are more difficult, we'll endure more hardship, but I don't think we're going to seek those out the way we choose to write—"choose" being the operative word. That said—what was the word you used? You said "torture," but what was at the other end of that?

### **Interviewer**

Something like solace for you as a writer.

### **Bret Anthony Johnston**

So that comes for me after having written it. That does not come during the writing process. It comes after you've finished a day's work or after you've finished a project. It's short lived but

it is there. I think in the way that the chemicals in our brain lead us to crave certain things—I think it’s the same thing with writing. I think you crave that solace that comes with having finished something, even just a day’s work, even just a sentence. I think you crave that and it’s so powerful, so potent, that you chase it and chase it and chase it regardless of how long it takes or what you have to endure along the way. I also think that to some degree there are some diminishing returns. I think the longer you write, the more you make this a part of your life, the harder it gets—unlike anything else you choose to do. If you’re learning to ride a bicycle, or learning to swim, certainly learning to walk, or maybe even learning to play guitar, anything like that, when you first start it’s very, very difficult, but the longer you do it the easier it becomes. It’s completely inverted with writing. When you first start writing it feels really easy. You think to yourself, “This feels great, I’m just laying all this out there, this is so exciting, this is so rewarding.” And then the more you write and the more you read you start to think, “Oh, that sentence wasn’t that good. I need to go back and recast this.” So, writing becomes more difficult to the point where that feeling you were originally chasing moves farther away on the horizon.

## **Appendix B**

Turning Wounds into Scars:  
On Writing and the Possibility of Catharsis

*An Interview with Richard Kearney*<sup>598</sup>

**RICHARD KEARNEY** is the author of over twenty books of philosophy and literature, including *The Wake of Imagination* and the trilogy, *On Stories*, *The God Who May Be*, and *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*. He is a member of the Royal Irish Academy and former member of the Arts Council of Ireland and the Higher Education Authority of Ireland, and the former chairman of the Irish School of Film at University College Dublin. As a public intellectual in Ireland, he was involved in drafting a number of proposals for a Northern Irish peace agreement (1983, 1993, and 1995) and was a speech writer for Irish President Mary Robinson. He is the international director of the Guestbook Project, which attempts to make peace in war-torn communities through collaborative acts of storytelling. He currently holds the Charles B. Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College.

**Interviewer**

How would you describe your current approach to ethics and how it intersects with storytelling?

**Richard Kearney**

The main project I'm involved with at the moment is called the Guestbook Project, which is an international project that brings together students from opposite sides of warring communities. Our current part of this project is called "Exchanging Stories, Changing Histories." It uses the theory of Aristotle's *Poetics*—the notions of catharsis, mythos, mimesis—how we emplot our lives. So, instead of telling things one *after* another ("meta", after), as Aristotle says, you tell things one *because* of another ("dia", between). It's the *dia*, the between, the *connection*, that makes for the plot. So, you've got mythos-mimesis as the creative imitation of the plot which

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<sup>598</sup> Interview conducted by Austin M. Reece.

is in the background. I also use a lot of Ricoeur—the notions of configuration, prefiguration, and refiguration. That’s the philosophical background to the project. But when I’m talking to these kids in Mitrovica [Kosovo], Jerusalem, Dokdo [a disputed island in the Sea of Japan] and Derry [Northern Ireland], I don’t talk Aristotle and Ricoeur, but that’s at the back of it all.

So, the cathartic or therapeutic power of narrative interests me greatly. As I put in a recent piece “Writing Trauma,” it’s how we turn wounds into scars. Because wounds (in Greek, *trauma*, *traumata*) are essentially, as Freud says, *timeless*. Therefore, they are unconscious. They are inexperienced experiences and that’s why they’re traumas. That’s why they express themselves as absences, as a lack of words and memory, which is acted out compulsively either in repetitive actions or dreams. That’s kind of standard Freud from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. My hypothesis is that storytelling, oral or written, has the power to deform and disfigure but also can turn wounds into scars. That means leaving traces in words and works that can then be worked on. And then you get the Freudian “working-through,” the *durcharbeiten*. But you can’t work with trauma unless it becomes a scar.

There’s a phenomenon in medicine in terms of scar tissue where (I think it’s called granular fibrosis) there has to be a certain amount of air in the wound for it to heal. If it heals too quickly, if there’s a cover up, then it remains toxic. So, you have to open it up again and let it breathe for this process of healing to take place in the wound in order to get a scar that heals rather than simply a quick cover up that doesn’t heal. If you go too quickly in covering wounds up and forgetting, then it haunts you. Of course, if you leave it open too long then it festers. So, there are two modes of festering. Leaving the trauma untreated, unspoken, unwritten, unexpressed and therefore unexperienced—the whole point of trauma is that it’s so horrific and strong, Freud uses the word “shocking,” that it cannot be registered. So, it leaves a gap in you. And that gap, unless it is addressed and expressed, can then be transmitted trans-generationally.

And in fact, the three stories that I take up in “Writing Trauma,” Homer, Shakespeare and Joyce, are all trans-generational. Hamlet is acting out his father’s crime and wounds; “Odysseus” means the bearer of pain, the carrier of pain. He carries his father’s crimes and wounds. And Joyce is all about ghosts—the ghost of his mother, of Ireland, of the famine. And the writing of these works (which is actually acted out *within* these works in many ways) is a healing process. Redemption is maybe too strong a word, but I think there can be redemptive narratives which are ways of working-through (*durcharbeiten*).

To talk about Homer and wounds—when Odysseus returns to Ithaca he’s recognized by his nurse Eurycleia by the scar on his hip that he received as a young child on a hunting trip with his grandfather. There is a sense that this is a trans-generational scar. As a “carrier of pain,” Odysseus can also mean a bringer of pain as indeed he was as a warrior in Troy. He then becomes the receiver of pain as he goes through one trial after another in fear and trembling from the Cyclops to Circe. And then Odysseus becomes disillusionment—disillusioned of his heroic role and returns home a beggar man, a stranger to Ithaca, where he’s not recognized by his son who expects him to be a great hero-god. And the phrase he uses, “argyne,” as in argent, to shine, silver, is the language of Athena, the goddess of shining, glory, and heroics. But in fact, it’s Argos the dog, who recognizes Odysseus through his scent. And Odysseus’ nurse maid, the humblest servant in the house, recognizes him as well by touching his scar. It’s at that point that the wound of Odysseus, the carrier of pain, can become a scar, that the story can be told. There’s a great article written by Auerbach called “Odysseus’ Scar,” where he remarks that when Eurycleia touches the childhood wound of Odysseus the story is recounted of how he received it, which had been hidden throughout the whole book. The implication of this is that war is waged because the wounds were not translated into scars and told as stories. So, war is

language by proxy, by default and by other means—basically as failure. It's the lack of language in a way. That's Homer.

There's a lot in Shakespeare's Hamlet about inheriting the wound of his father as a ghost or ghosting. That's how traumas are acted out unless we tell the story. That's what we have at the end when Hamlet receives the wound which is the same wound inflicted by his father in the famous duel at Forinbras to secure the union between Poland and Denmark. When Hamlet is dying, he says to Horatio, "abesenth thee from felicity awhile to tell my story." That's how the story is told and the play is written. Joyce is another day's work. I go into the famine wounding and how that ghosts the book and his dead mother and so on. Then it's Stephen and Bloom trying to tell the story through the intermediary of Molly.

These are all—I wouldn't call them redemptive—but healing narratives, wounds becoming scars. When Joyce went to see Jung in Zurich with his daughter Lucia who was psychotic and hospitalized for the rest of her life, Jung said to Joyce if you hadn't written *Ulysses* then you'd be as psychotic as your daughter—it's your book that saved you. It was Frost who said that poetry was a momentary stay against confusion, and in a way poetry is a micro-narrative. So, that's the literary side of things.

In *The Wake of Imagination* I always tried to put poetics and ethics together because I think they need each other. The ethics, the praxis (this is something I get from Ricoeur), goes from 1) action, prefiguration—life in quest of narrative to 2) text, configuration—writing, literature, art, the emplotted story which can be oral as well; then 3) you go back to action again. So, you go from action to text back to action. That return then is the return to ethics or what he calls refiguration. That's the application of the narrated life to the lived life once again. And it's not like then you leave narratives behind forever. That re-narrated, re-figured life, is itself the

prefiguration of another story and another narrative. So, Guestbook is an attempt to pass from text to action.

We started the project back in 2009 as a series of seminars, conferences, poetry festivals, and talks. We published the books *Hosting the Stranger* and *Phenomenologies of the Stranger* as well as three journal issues. We produced a number of documentary films and recordings. That's academic work. Now we're working with youths in divided communities in different parts of the world. The main projects at the moment are Derry, Jerusalem, Mitrovica, Dokdo, which is an island between Korea and Japan that's disputed territory, and the Mexican-American border.

Just to give you an example of the Derry one—we invite pairs (in Derry it's a Catholic-nationalist and a Protestant-unionist) to tell from their own point of view the history of the walls of Derry. So, for the Protestant the walls of Derry represent the protection of an establishment of civic rights in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. For the Catholic nationalists, the walls of Derry, 300 years ago, represent the expulsion of Catholics from the town into the bog side—therefore disinheritance and dispossession, alienation and injustice. So, they tell their respective stories to camera and then they tell it from their enemy's point of view (they house the adversary's story). Lastly, the two *together* in a third moment recreate a new story from the ingredients of the walls of Derry and all they've picked up from their grandfathers, great-grandfathers and contemporaries. They create in five minutes a short video. This is happening at the moment in Derry with different pairs.

Then in Mitrovica it's the battle of Kosovo between the Serbs and Kosovars. The same battle is told from two different points of view. And there, one of the little films that's come in—and these are very simple films made by the students using flip cameras and basic edit pro equipment—is the same song, in terms of the same tune, but sung with different words by the

opposite sides. And so, there is a Kosovar and Serb that sing from across the river Ibar that separates Mitrovica down the middle between two religions, two municipalities, two ethnicities, two languages. They sing this song back and forth across from each other on a tight rope.

And then in Jerusalem it's the story of Mount Moriah where the Palestinian tells of how for Abraham the favored son is Ishmael in the Koran, in the Hadith, whereas in the Torah it's Isaac. Then they recreate the story of Isaac and Ishmael meeting in contemporary Jerusalem. Mount Moriah is the spot where Mohamed was supposedly elevated into heaven. It is also the sacred space for the Jews where the binding of Isaac took place. But the same sacred place is a place of dispute, conflict, and violence. How can you retell that story while acknowledging the split that occurred in the Abrahamic family at that point that has now reached bellicose and belligerent proportions? How can you retell that story in a kind of creative leap of imagination so that some impossible peace is made? That's the basic premise of Guestbook. The word "guest" in Latin, as in all Indo-European languages, is the same as the word for enemy—*hostis*—which is the root of hostility and hospitality and hence our word host. And *xenos* in Greek and *Gast* in German and so on. It's the wager between the two that we're working on.

And a final one since it's on my mind—in fact if you look up the Guestbook Project.com you'll see the Dokdo film—and that's just a young Korean student and a young Japanese student who go back and forth on the history of these islands that are disputed and halfway between Korea and Japan. This goes back hundreds of years in dispute between the two kingdoms right up to the Second World War and even today. The students make together, having recounted their adversarial stories (which they document and cite using laws and testimonies going back centuries), a comic-strip video using a Lady Gaga song where they fight each other, which then turns into a love dance. There are birds everywhere [in the video] because Dokdo is now a bird sanctuary—it's a place that now has one-hundred thirty species.

Their proposal is that it be demilitarized and that it be devoted to birds, to the proliferation of birds. Because [Dokdo] is not inhabited due to the dual sovereignty claims, birds have been able to flourish. So, they're saying why not withdraw and leave the place for the birds. "It's for the birds," as the phrase goes but in a good sense.

Funnily enough, as I got this video from them (we've posted in on the website [see: <https://mediakron.bc.edu/guestbook/home>]), I was reading a book by Thich Nhat Hanh where he talks about the no-man's land between North and South Korea as being this kind of swath of land—the thirty-eighth parallel—that's become a sanctuary for flora and fauna precisely because it's wasteland. Out of the greatest hostility a space is made. Out of the wound a scar can flourish and heal.

#### **Interviewer**

You used that phrase "the trace" in regard to storytelling. Could you say a little bit more about what you mean by "the trace" in this context?

#### **Richard Kearney**

Well, to leave a trace—a scar is a trace—has that wonderful connotation of something you cannot fully grasp or possess. As Levinas would say, it's the trace of the other that has already passed. And that's true of somebody's wound. You can never appropriate it to yourself and say, "I fully understand you." You'll never fully understand the suffering of the other person. Something remains different and alien to you. And respecting that is very important. It will never be your suffering. Empathy can only go so far. And empathy is not just about seeing how the other's suffering is like yours but experiencing the other's suffering which is *unlike* anything you've ever experienced and will remain unlike it. So, it's actually suffering with the other in their alterity, in their difference, and being with them in their pain rather than immediately

trying to cure it and fill the gap by saying, “Well, I know the answer.” This can be very altruistic on one level but on another level it’s not accepting the otherness of the other person. I wasn’t in Auschwitz, I wasn’t in The Famine, and so I don’t know exactly what it was like. But I can try to empathize with that in all its foreignness. And so, what I can have are traces, but not the (to talk Husserl) the adequate intuition of a full experience. It always remains something strange. In the Guestbook Project the important thing about hosting a guest is that you allow the guest to remain different. You don’t say come into my house as long as you become me; you accept them precisely as them in your house. You respect the strangeness of the stranger rather than turning them into an alter ego. So, that’s very important in the exchange of stories—it’s not about mutual appropriation but a mutual appreciation of each other’s different histories and narratives. So, trace in that sense.

Also, trace in the sense of the invisible becoming visible. And tracing is also a form of writing I would say in that when you’ve got a trace you’ve got a mark and when you’ve got a mark you’ve got representation of some kind that stands in for an absence. So, it’s an absence in presence. It’s got that wonderful kind of ambivalence that Levinas talks about. It also has memory. When you get traces of something as in ruins or traces in the sand, it’s of something that has been. So, it’s the past. It’s recognizing that the past has a certain immemorial quality. No matter how much you remember through traces there’s always that little element of difference. Ricoeur has a nice chapter on that in the third volume of *Time and Narrative* called “Standing in for the Past.” The marks of history, the traces of history. He goes through Levinas.

### **Interviewer**

You mention Levinas in this context and it worries me a little bit that there’s an inclination towards masochism or being too passive in his writings. Thinking about these war-torn

communities where violence is something very real and tangible, is there a limit to this where you say, “I’ll let the other be other but if they’re violent, if they become hostile, then the project stops, and empathy shuts down.”

**Richard Kearney**

You can’t have an exchange of stories if someone’s got a gun to your head. It presupposes the open hand. It begins with Diomedes and Glaucus in the *Iliad*—throw away the sword and then the first act of hospitality can take place. You can tell the story of violence but if you’re actually engaged in violence—it’s like Gerry Adams can’t enter the peace process if he’s got a gun in his pocket, but he can if he says he’s leaving his gun outside. Better still if he says I’m leaving my gun outside and I have killed people. In other words, he’s telling the truth. Otherwise, if he says “Oh, I never had a gun, what gun?” That is beginning with a lie.

**Interviewer**

Do you endorse in the Catholic tradition the idea of just war theory where violence can be justified in some cases?

**Richard Kearney**

It’s not something I’ve ever studied. I dislike the very idea of justifying war as kind of moral principle because I don’t think war is ever just. I think it can be more just to go war to fight the Nazis to stop innocent people from being killed in Auschwitz. It’s more just to go and help people who are being slaughtered—maybe—but it’s still not just. I worry about this idea, “This is a just war.” You could say it’s more just than doing nothing, but it’s still never totally just because awful things happen in war even with the best intentions. Do I think the Second World

War should have been waged against Hitler? Yes, to liberate the countries he dominated, to stop Auschwitz and the Holocaust. Do I therefore say it was just to bomb Dresden and Hamburg with firebombing where a hundred thousand innocent women and children were burned to death? No. Hiroshima? No. But I can understand the logic of war. But to call a war just is not understandable, but maybe it's an injustice against a worse injustice. That I can kind of understand.

### **Interviewer**

Making connections in my mind as you're talking, I've got two thoughts that bring me to Heidegger: 1) as you were talking about the trace, bringing something into presence, do you think Heidegger's language of truth, *aletheia*, is still relevant in this context? And 2) do you think his philosophical legacy remains intact given the recent publication of his journals that reveal the extent of his affiliation and endorsement with Nazism?

### **Richard Kearney**

It's one of the great ironies that such a great thinker could be such an immoral human being. And it's a great irony in Ezra Pound, in Céline, of the Marquis de Sade, Paul de Man. Now, Heidegger wasn't the worst, but he's very badly damaged. A lot of people will use it as an excuse to never study Heidegger which is a great shame. I remember Levinas saying to certain of his Talmudic Jewish students that "I don't approve of Heidegger's politics but he's still the greatest thinker of the twentieth-century." Heidegger talked about the essential greatness of Nazism and never apologizes even when Paul Celan, the Jewish poet, goes to him at Todtnauberg. Heidegger receives him and they're talking and talking and Celan is waiting for, you know, "it's a terrible thing what happened to your people." But it never happened. And

Celan wrote this beautiful poem called “Todtnauberg” about it—the word *withheld*. And that is a moral failing and a political failing without a doubt.

Now, certain Heideggerians can say that he accounts for this in his philosophy of errancy—that we are all in errancy and we’re all sinners. Sure, but some people try to do something about that and repent for it and say I’m sorry. He never fought in the war so he never killed anybody, but his words gave a certain sanction to Hitler and then his refusal to repent afterwards. You know you might say in the heat of the moment, “I’ve got three sons on the front and if I protest against Hitler I’ll end up in prison and I need to look after my wife.” In the heat of war all kinds of things go on and who knows how much people knew. But *after* the war when the enormity of the crimes became visible, then it seems to me inexcusable that Heidegger didn’t say, “Now that I know all that I know I made a terrible error and a moral failing.” Errancy as an ontological category means we’re all part of it and he did tend to equate Stalinism, Hitlerism, and Americanism. Which is a way of saying it doesn’t matter which side you were on in the war because everything was evil. And that’s true up to a point, but one side did commit the Holocaust and the other didn’t. And there’s a difference between French, British, and Danish democracy, and Hitlerite thuggery.

### **Interviewer**

I know you’ve written on the idea of transfiguration in *The God Who May Be*. You have these students in the classroom working through, in a very practical way, the wounds they carry so that they might be turned into scars. Do you think the work they’re doing could lead to something like transfiguration in the religious sense?

### **Richard Kearney**

I don't think there is any recipe for that. In terms of Guestbook, we've announced this prize where we give a prize to the best project sent in by two students from different sides of a divided community. They all work in video and are posted online. It could be a play that they do, an artwork, a poem, an action, a gesture, but it has to be captured on video and posted. The fact is that coming from the opposite side of the road or the river or the border and telling your story to the other, hearing the story of the other and co-creating a story with the other, especially this third part (if they go that far), is a small miracle. If it happens, it happens, and you don't say part three is forgiveness, grace, and epiphany. You can't prescribe these things. And in that sense it's not an explicitly evangelical religious project. Part of it is inter-religious dialogue but that's about how religious violence between traditions can become inter-communion and translation as Ricoeur puts it in his little book on translation. He's got a marvelous section on linguistic hospitality which he then links to inter-confessional hospitality.

Most of the work in Guestbook is in conflict zones where the divisions are primarily political but also religious. In Northern Ireland it's religious too, and Jerusalem and Mitrovica in the Balkans. It isn't particularly religious on the Mexican-American border or Dokdo. So, there isn't an explicit religious agenda, but I would say the act of turning hostility into hospitality, that wager on the impossible act of creating with your enemies some new story that can transfigure what was disfigured, does have a spiritual dimension—a kind of faith in the impossible. And if I was asked for a definition of God, I would say that it's the possibility of the impossible. But one doesn't have to use the word God to acknowledge that. It happens. It is the miracle of change happening and that does involve forgiveness even if the people don't say, "Oh, I forgive you for killing my brother, I forgive you for torturing my sister." It doesn't necessarily have to be an explicit, ritualized act, but it is in itself a sacramental gesture it seems to me. It's like the old Catholic theology that there can be baptism of fire and baptism of desire.

You may never be baptized, but if you desire the divine then your desire is enough to baptize you.

**Interviewer**

I've never heard of that interpretation, but I like it.

**Richard Kearney**

Well, maybe that's my interpretation of it. [Laughter] But I think it's not too far from the truth.